

GUARDIANS OF INFINITY

TO SAVE KENNEDY



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The Novella

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Chapter 1

The “T” was four minutes away from Brattle Station as Ken Gardner watched Linda Furbie sneeze. Pulling a crumpled tissue from her sweater pocket, she dabbed at her nose and pursed her lips, displeased with her allergies.

Linda excused herself and reattached her eyeglasses on her nose. Although glasses had been medically obsolete for decades, having been replaced by permanent contact lenses, people continued to wear frames with neutral lenses as fashion accessories. Combined with her cropped blonde hair and the suggestion of a double chin, the spectacles balanced Linda’s appearance. She had great natural beauty, but chose the academic understatement provided by eyeframes.

Ken and Linda were making what seemed like their hundredth trip to the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library as part of a massive research project that they and other Harvard graduate students were performing for their American History professor, William Stein, PhD, an elderly scholar with a quietly obsessive manner.

Graduate professors routinely use their students as cheap labor when conducting research, but the professor almost always informs the students about the nature of their work. As the train slowed for its approach to the station, the young scholars resumed their running debate concerning the purpose of their research. In assigning Ken, Linda and five other students to this project, Professor Stein remained uncharacteristically vague and secretive in explaining his purposes. Was he writing a major paper or book or perhaps preparing for a symposium on Kennedy? The really bothersome question was what possibly could justify the professor’s hiring seven people to locate intellectually dull and historically trivial facts about the last week in the life of John F. Kennedy, President of the United States from 1960 to 1963? For six weeks, Linda, Ken and the other students had been compiling information concerning the daily whereabouts of various members of the Kennedy administration from Friday, November 13 to Friday, November 22, 1963— the day the popular young president was assassinated.

Utilizing the vast records at the JFK Library, the researchers quickly compiled accurate schedules for the various Secretaries and chief advisors to the President. But Stein proved to be a difficult and thorough taskmaster. Not satisfied with knowing the wheres and whens of Secretaries of State and Defense, Stein demanded information about even the most obscure undersecretaries, bureaucrats and staffers in the Kennedy administration. The old professor apparently wanted to know where everybody, even those tangentially connected to the administration, was and what they were doing, every hour of every day, between November 15 and November 22, 1963. One student, a hot head named Harold Balk, quit the project in anger and frustration, seeing no value in his assignment to document that week's activities for Joannie Douglas, the 24-year old wife of septuagenarian Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas.

To Ken, Linda's latest theory regarding Stein's elusive plans seemed desperately far-fetched.

"A novel, Linda? By Stein?" Ken asked incredulously.

"Yes, a murder thriller set in the 1960's involving the Kennedy assassination. It would explain why he needs such detailed information about the week before Kennedy's death and with the current neo-revisionism concerning the Kennedy presidency, such a novel could be extremely popular."

"William Stein wouldn't be caught dead writing popular fiction," Ken rebutted her. "He's been a literary and academic elitist for over thirty years. He considers all fiction since post-modernism to be uninspired bourgeoisie kitsch."

"You sound like you're quoting him."

"I am."

"Maybe he just wants to make a lot of money and retire," Linda offered.

"He's already rich, Linda. I don't see why everyone is investing Stein's silence with so much mystery. He's JFK's great-grandson, for God's sake. Obviously he's going to be interested in the assassination. Maybe he's trying to puzzle out an answer to all the conspiracy plots surrounding the assassination and is trying to hide his use of university resources for non-academic purposes. Whatever he's doing, I don't really care as long as we're being paid."

The train slowed to a stop in front of the station and the computerized conductor announced their arrival.

"So you've stopped thinking entirely about what Stein might be up to?" queried Linda.

"Yeah I have."

"You've got a keenly inquisitive mind for a future historian, Kenno." Linda rose from her seat and walked down the aisle of the train, pre-

empting any reply to her barb, which didn't upset Ken, who lacked an especially agile wit.

Linda stood on the sidewalk amid gently flurrying snow as Ken stepped from the train and looked skyward; "Looks like we'll get that snow after all."

Linda shivered, burying her chin in her jacket collar. "I'm freezing; let's go," she said stepping backwards toward the library, a few hundred feet distant.

"Linda, watch! . . ." Ken couldn't finish his warning before Linda tripped over and fell back into the wooden water trough that suddenly materialized behind her.

Linda screamed in surprise and pain as her head struck the side of the trough and the water splashed over her and her books. Arms and legs helplessly flailing, Linda sat jack-knifed in the narrow receptacle. "Get me out of here." Ken quickly clutched her hand and pulled her from the water. "I'm soaked. Where the hell did that come from? What the hell is it?"

Ken snatched Linda's books from the water. "It's a horse trough. Horses used to drink from them. I think it's a time anomaly," he said, excited. "Don't get too close," he warned the crowd of train passengers drawn by Linda's screams, "we don't know how long it'll stay." He glanced at Linda. "Your gonna get pneumonia out here," Ken said clutching her dripping wet jacket sleeve and pulling her on a run to the JFK Library.

The glass doors slid aside as Ken and Linda dashed into the building, their momentum carrying them to the far side of the lobby and drawing stares from tourists and members of the library staff. They both dropped their books to the floor and Linda removed her drenched coat and greedily absorbed the library's heat. "Aww, look at my books; they're soaked!" she moaned.

"They'll dry off. Here, do you want to put my coat on?" Ken offered.

Holding her sleeve, Linda looked at the water dripping on the marble floor, only now realizing its significance. "An honest-to-heaven time anomaly. Can you believe that? I wonder how old this water is? Let's get out there and take a look at that thing," Linda said, tugging Ken's coat on and heading for the exit.

At 1:30 p.m., sitting in his book-strewn office at Harvard University, William Stein contemplated the fate of the ages. History appeared terminally stricken and William, history's long-time admirer, agonized as he would over a sick friend.

Lighting his pipe, Stein also contemplated himself. Sixty-four years old, paunchier than ever, Stein faced the end of an academic career to

which he had dedicated his life. History fascinated Stein since he could first read. As a child he frequently locked himself in his room with his books, reading for hours at a time about the legendary heroes of the past. Where his young friends found history to be an interminable stream of dates and lifeless facts, William's fertile imagination perceived an intricately woven, epoch spanning drama complete with fearless heroes and base villains. The history of mankind abounded in all aspects of the human spirit and young William greedily immersed himself in all its passions: the fatal courage of the Greeks at Thermopylae, the smashed ambition of Napoleon at Waterloo, the martyrdom of Davy Crockett at the Alamo and the deceit of Richard Nixon and Watergate.

When he was in college, William's passion for history continued to burn, maturing beyond a lust for the dramatic to a hunger for accuracy and the truth located in complex interlocking historical events. A historian, he believed, should accurately record facts and trace the causal relationships among events. Drama is fun. But the foundation of history is documentation and throughout his academic life, from Groton to Harvard to Columbia and back to Harvard, Stein remained devoted to accurately recording and preserving historic fact. He never married, had few friends outside academic circles and often worked twelve and fourteen hours per day. A life devoted to the past.

When he was a doctoral candidate at Harvard, the concept of time travel, rapidly becoming a reality, was anathema to his perception of history as a rational process. Since Einstein, physicists had been debating time travel on paper, but in the last fifty years scientists began seriously exploring the viability of moving physically through time. William Stein fervently hoped that these experiments would fail. Like any historian, Stein coveted a first-hand glimpse of the past he knew so well. But he loathed the possibility of men and women interacting with the historical causes of present events. The prospect of cause and effect folding back on themselves and altering the causal flow which had originally created them offended his professional understanding of history as a rational dialectic. "It's that damn chaos theory of the 1990's," he often complained. "A string of psuedo-Einsteins attending to a junk pile of left-handed theories."

By 2053, time travel was the hot science. The government awarded research grants to dozens of private researchers. Students inundated graduate schools with applications to study the temporal sciences. The military launched massive research programs to realize the military potential of time travel. The first great breakthrough occurred in 2058 when Valery Pincard and Victor Rakovich, in a paper delivered at the Tenth Conference of Temporal Scientists, revealed a series of equations enabling them to predict relative movements along the time-space continuum. In 2067 Bertrand Soren analogized the existence of time "ripples" and thus created

the branch science of Paradoxology. These two breakthroughs convinced then-U.S President Joseph Santel of the viability of time travel and led him to establish, in 2071, the Tempus Frangit Institute, as the temporal science equivalent to the venerable National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Santel's concentrating of the entire national effort under one organization paid handsome dividends. Several scientists now stood on the brink of major breakthroughs and one, Adam Cooper, claimed to have solved the Gordian knot of the time barrier and would soon travel to the past.

Stein met Cooper years ago when the two of them attended a conference on The Potential Threat to American History from Four-Space Paradoxes, at MIT three years before. People were just beginning to recognize the crisis then, although its effects had existed for years. Despite their bitter disagreement over the possibilities of time travel, they respected each other's intelligence and became friends.

The current threat to the vitality of the time line became public knowledge four years before, although most scientists believe the crisis' effects could trace back as much as a hundred years, when a rash of random historical anomalies clued temporal scientists to the existence of the crisis. The first recorded incident occurred in Mexico City when a Toltec Indian appeared in a café and, frightened by the alien surroundings and his inability to communicate, wounded four people with a war club before fleeing the restaurant and inexplicably disappearing several blocks down the street.

Over the next four years similar sightings occurred around the globe. A German World War I infantry battalion charged down the main street of a rural village in France. In June 2084, U.S. Strategic Air Command fighters, tracking what they assumed to be an alien bomber, filmed a pterodactyl in flight for three full minutes before the long "extinct" creature vanished. Most fantastic was Mao Tse Tung's unscheduled appearance at the Chinese Communist Party Congress which spooked the nation's leadership into initiating a third cultural revolution. On a humbler level, investigators documented hundreds of random manifestations of ordinary objects: chairs, plates, lanterns, pianos, for minutes at a time.

Most scientists offered few explanations for the disturbances, noting only the increasing frequency and duration of the anomalies. Some experts believed that the time stream was undergoing a period of adjustment and the temporal energies once aligned, would eventually stabilize. Other more extreme opinions, including Adam Cooper's, warned of Gotterdammerung.

Religious groups interpreted the crisis as a warning from God for mankind to repent his many sins. The Reverend Theodore P. Wannasee, believing the crisis promised a disaster of Biblical proportions, announced

he and his followers would build a "time ark," and escape into the past with a male and female from every species of animal.

But the general public failed to share in the scientific and eschatological hysteria. The first wave of anomaly stories sparked intense curiosity, followed by a panic once the potential threat of the disturbances became public knowledge. But in the last three years, a wave of pervasive apathy swept the world population. Global economic production dramatically fell as people worked less often and less efficiently. Students withdrew from school in record numbers. The birth rate dropped sharply as people saw little future to raising children. Conversely, every denomination of organized religion gained hundreds of thousands of converts desperately seeking to prepare for the next world. Tourism and travel increased as did sales of liquor and tobacco products. Casino revenues soared. People partied more, worked less and furiously sought to enjoy whatever time they had left.

Only a handful of people shared William Stein's perspective on the crisis. His forty-year academic career was collapsing. If the Gotterdammerung truly loomed nigh, what could he accomplish by recording and preserving a history soon to be extinct? He hadn't performed serious research in years and lectured perfunctorily. He remained at Harvard simply because, at sixty-four, he had nowhere else to go.

Breaking out of his melancholic reverie and noticing the time, William emptied his pipe into the ashtray; he still smoked the old fashion models which didn't fully deplete the tobacco, and gathered up a stack of textbooks. Closing his door behind him, he set off towards his first class of the spring semester, freshman American history, which he continued to teach despite the professional sneering of his peers who considered such introductory courses beneath their intellects. But William enjoyed the young students for whom every experience was exciting and new and hoped to channel some of their enthusiasm towards history. But today, unable to maintain his own enthusiasm, William wished he could cut class. In order to counter declining enrollment, universities demanded that their instructors equivocate when discussing the crisis and be as hopeful as possible. More than the loss of his career, more than fear for his own safety, this lying to his students deeply troubled him.

Frustrated by the deceitful chore awaiting him in the classroom, William swiftly walked across the campus, ignoring the greetings of passing students and the scenery of the historic campus which usually delighted the old professor. Entering Kissinger Hall, he bypassed the elevator and charged up the two flights of stairs leading to his classroom.

Breathing heavily by the time he reached the second floor, William sagged against the wall. "That's it, Stein," he mumbled through gasps of breath, "give yourself a heart attack. That will excuse you from

teaching.” For a man whose life is essentially sedentary, William was relatively fit. But wiping the sweat from his face and tucking his shirt over his paunch, he noted the forfeitures that one makes to time.

As he called roll, William carefully considered his students, young and unscarred by experience. Hiding nothing and awed by the four-hundred year tradition of the university, they instinctively trusted the wisdom of their instructor, who was about to lie to them. Sadly he noted the many empty seats. Even Harvard couldn’t fill a classroom in this apathetic new world.

Closing the role book, William stepped down from the podium platform and began what in the last four years had become his standard introductory lecture.

“I’m almost surprised to see so many of you here, considering the current apathy towards education,” he began in his immimicable hybrid New England/Jewish accent. “That you are here exhibits your faith in education and history as continually viable pursuits. I hope this course can reaffirm your faith.”

“Whom am I deceiving?” William thought. “Most of these students attended class because, like their teacher, they didn’t know what else to do except play their assigned roles until the end.”

“Since the diagnosing of the crisis, various scientists, clerics and politicians have warned us of world ending doom. But in truth, such hysteria comprises little more than speculation. For every doom-sayer someone exists with equal qualifications who will assure us the time line is merely undergoing a series of adjustments and realignments or is in flux due to temporary perturbations in the space-time continuum. The fate of the planet remains an open question and we, as non-participants in the debate, can only struggle on in our various pursuits until such time as the answers become clear.” Liar! Such dishonesty threatened to make him physically ill. His mouth tasted as though he’d bitten into a cake of soap.

“What do the current time anomalies mean to those of us interested in the search for the truth revealed in the historical dynamic?” William walked towards the windows to his right, seguing into the body of his lecture. “I have long believed in the interconnection of all historical events, but the current crisis exhibits an intolerably extreme example of this intertwining.”

“However, I have never asserted any preordained fate or manifest destiny or ultimate end to history. But at the same time, undeniably, history is moving in some direction, propelled by a self-perpetuating dynamic. We have Charles Darwin to thank for this bit of insight. His classification of animals in *The Origin of Species* revolutionized Biology, but its effects ultimately were more profound on philosophy and history. For in theorizing man’s ascent from ape, Darwin introduced the concept of

development and evolution to truth seeking. Post-Darwin man could no longer obtain truth by examining a situation at any particular time. The truth of any situation became attainable only through an appreciation of the events and conflicts which necessarily produced the given situation." William began pacing across the front of the room as he spoke, attempting to marshal some fraction of the enthusiasm which once came to him so naturally. But the sour soap in his mouth nearly gagged his every word.

"History is infinitely more sophisticated than a mere cause and effect relationship. In the 1870's the United States built a transcontinental railroad to accommodate the demand for western expansion. Once completed, the coast-to-coast line facilitated easier western expansion, thus increasing westward migration which required greater rail capacity, which further increased western development and on and on. Event A causing event B and event B reciprocating, the two inseparably bound together, each propelling the other forward towards . . . towards what!?" He wanted to scream at the young faces. He was breathing the soap in now, suffocating. He stepped up onto the speaker's platform.

His voice became louder and trembled. "What is history moving towards?" He pleaded more than asked.

"Spiritual salvation? Social utopia? Marx thought history would end with the triumph of the proletariat over the middle classes. I don't know where history will end. Such speculation isn't a historian's job. A historian records and interprets history as accurately as possible. But of what use is saving the past while the present dies?"

The students, some of whom had lost interest in the lecture, all stared at their professor, realizing something was wrong. Rubbing his eyes with his hands, William tried to address them more calmly, but his voice wavered with emotion. "What can I teach you children? I am sorry but I cannot lie to you. I cannot assure you the world is safe or history remains relevant. These are not hopeless times, but they are desperate times. And they may be last times. You should not spend these hours listening to an old man lie. My advice to you is to go and enjoy life as much as you can in whatever time remains." Head bent, William wearily stepped from the platform and walked to the door, leaving his books in the classroom.

William sat in his office, feet on the desk, collar open, drinking scotch. The Board of Directors would not be happy when they heard about his lecture. They may well dismiss him. So be it, he thought. If he is dismissed, he will follow the advice he gave his students: drink the finest wines, smoke the best tobaccos, work in his wood shop, till his garden. But he would not lie anymore. And he would not agonize over his career or the possible end of history. Carpe diem, he thought. He will live for the day and, if the end comes, he will face it with calm and dignity.

The buzzing of his picta-phone splintered his hard-won peace. Annoyed, William pressed the answer button. Adam Cooper's image coalesced on the screen. "William, if you've got a moment, I think we can save time."

Chapter 2

As dinosaurs, Spanish Conquistadors and cavemen continued to appear in restaurants, bus terminals and people's living rooms, a frightened world realized it needed a hero. If such a hero or heroine existed, he or she probably worked in the Tempus Frangit Institute for Temporal Research, located in suburban Boston. Since 2071, the massive four hundred acre complex's twenty-eight laboratories have served as home for the world's leading researchers in temporal physics, paradoxology, futurology, four-space mapping and over a dozen other disciplines investigating the fourth dimension. While other nations conducted temporal research, the United States, through Tempus Frangit, unquestionably dominated the field. Soviet research never recovered the setbacks it suffered during the global Third World insurrections of 2068-2074. Although dominating world production of consumer durable goods, China lacked sufficient technology to engage in anything other than basic R&D. Most of the notable European researchers, responsible for a number of important breakthroughs, notably the famous Pincard-Rakovish equation, had joined their efforts with Tempus Frangit. Thus T.F., with the richest endowments, latest technology and the most talented and brilliant minds, inherited by default the task of solving the time crisis.

If Tempus Frangit inevitably had to produce a hero, Adam Cooper seemed a likely candidate. He even looked the part, with leading man good looks, a solid chin and intense brown eyes revealing remnants of youthful energy. But his slightly graying sand-brown hair and the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and mouth betrayed his forty-three years. Blessed with athletic grace, having lettered in both rugby and swimming in college, he remained solid, though lately, he was unable to exercise due to his relentless work schedule, and felt sluggish and unhealthy.

But scientific genius, not physical gifts, made Adam Cooper special. After completing his undergraduate work in Physics, with full honors, he determined, like so many brilliant young men of his generation, to pursue Chronological Physics as his life's work. But few men attacked their field with the single-minded zeal and aggression Cooper brought to his

investigations of temporal theory. As a young researcher in 2076, he immediately recognized that the facilities at Tempus Frangit exceeded anything a private researcher could obtain and, despite the objections of his partner, Carl Czernak, Cooper committed their research to the Institute. The possibility of ceding control of his work to the Institute never concerned him, breaking the time barrier justified any actions.

With the advent of the crisis, Cooper became almost manic, working days at a time, furiously seeking to break the time barrier. Two months ago, with characteristic recklessness, Cooper created an international uproar by announcing at a press conference that he would travel back in time and prevent the Kennedy assassination, which he claimed was causing the time crisis. His announcement generated new hope and enthusiasm in an apathetic world populace, sparking demonstrations around the globe. Governments debated and passed resolutions. And Adam Cooper became an international sensation, more in demand than any statesman or celebrity. In an effort to cease the publicity and maintain the secrecy of temporal research, U.S. President Elizabeth Grant immediately issued a gag order, forbidding Cooper from publicly addressing the issue of time travel until he and Czernak fully briefed her on the results of their work. For the past week, the two scientists had testified daily before the President's domestic and scientific advisors, covering the nature and history of their research, the proposed rescue mission and the potential ramifications of time travel on the time-space continuum.

On a cold Thursday afternoon, Adam Cooper returned to Tempus Frangit from Washington, tense, tired but relieved he and Carl's testimony before the President's commission of scientific advisors was finished. He wanted to believe that Carl and he were performing well but he worried about the consistent opposition of Irwin Bazelon, a former temporal researcher and head of the President's Science Council, who stubbornly contested every point Carl and Adam tried to make.

Carl had remained at the lab this morning while Adam delivered their closing arguments in Washington before catching the bullet train back to Boston where he'd work for the rest of the day. The loss of half a day's work irritated Cooper, as did his having to sneak into the institute, by way of an underground entrance, to avoid the demonstrators and reporters camping at the main entrance. Striding across the grassy mall at the center of Tempus Frangit, Cooper noticed Ben Keyes angling towards him from across the mall. A former FBI agent and current Chief of Institute Security, Ben was Cooper's closest friend at the Institute. A former FBI agent, intensely loyal, honest and fearless, Ben compiled an impressive arrest and conviction record and ranked among the top field operatives in the country. But his success brought him into conflict with envious superiors, threatened by his growing reputation in the bureau. When the

government began combing the law enforcement community for candidates for the T.F. security job, the Director of the FBI, wanting the post awarded to a Bureau man, automatically considered Ben whose exemplary record made him an attractive candidate. His supervisors eagerly supported Ben's involuntary candidacy, seeing the important but dull job as a means of removing Ben from the Bureau's career ladder. When the appointment came through Ben bitterly complained to anyone who would listen. He had been a field agent his entire life, never wanting anything else. The Director, however, reminded Ben that if he turned the appointment down, the President would likely appoint someone outside the FBI. As a matter of duty, Ben could not refuse.

Although heartbroken over his professional excommunication, Ben accepted his duty rendering Tempus Frangit inaccessible to unauthorized personnel. But he quickly despaired of his wholly administrative and un-taxing duties and, in an effort to combat his inactivity and boredom, cultivated a legitimate curiosity in the work at T.F., questioning the resident scientists about their experiments whenever he could. Adam Cooper informally tutored Ben more than any other scientist and, over time, the two became friends, Cooper respecting Ben's uncompromising loyalty and honesty, Ben admiring Cooper's tenacity and boldness. But since Adam's famous press conference, teacher and student found little time for one another. Ben was kept busy by an avalanche of reporters and politicians wanting to speak to the famous temporal scientist. Political and religious groups protested in front of the complex daily, the Brother and Sisterhood of the Abyss being the most notable and violent. Unfortunately for Ben, his interest in Adam's research was keener than ever and in order to remain informed, he pounced on any opportunity to speak with his newly famous friend, stopping him in corridors, in the cafeteria, even following him into bathrooms.

"Well, what blunt objects did the inquisition pull out today?" Ben asked, falling into step with Cooper. A few inches shorter than the scientist, Ben had to walk quickly to keep up. He was having a busy day, his badly wrinkled suit sloppier than usual and his prematurely gray hair standing up like the bristles of a worn-out broom.

"No verdicts. Just more questions. That damn Bazelon's intent on challenging my every word. I thought he'd at least pretend to be unbiased, but he won't even grant me the most basic assumptions he knows are valid. If he has the President's ear, she'll never approve the mission."

"Don't worry, Coop. The government always likes to remind you they hold the reins, make you squirm a bit." He spoke in his usual clipped tones. "But in the end it always does what's best for the country." Cooper marveled at his friend's blind trust in the benignity of the federal government. He once considered recommending Ben for a place among

the time machine's crew, but decided the former FBI agent's first loyalties would always be to the government. Once a Fed, always a Fed. "What'd they try and hit you with today?"

"Mostly basics. Primarily quanta limitations on transferal frequency and duration."

"O.K. That's the stuff about why people can only stay back in time for short periods because the cosmic balance won't handle it for too long."

"That's more or less it," Cooper confirmed.

"Well, I understand all that stuff. What I don't understand is how you know that this time anomaly craziness began back in 1963?"

Having completed his sixth straight day of testimony, Cooper hardly felt like reciting theory to Ben. He brusquely explained, "I wasn't sure until a few weeks ago, but now I'm positive. President Kennedy shouldn't have been killed in Dallas."

Ben stopped walking and glared at Cooper. Although Adam publicly proposed his mission, only a select few knew his precise objective. "How the hell can you know something like that. I mean we're talking about a documented historical fact. You can't change the course of the time stream, can you?"

"It's not a historical fact and the time stream analogy is false; you know that." Cooper realized he would have to satisfy his friend's curiosity before Ben would let him alone. "Come on. I'll explain this but we'll have to keep walking. Carl and I have dozens of tests to run." Crossing the mall, they walked towards Building #22 housing Cooper's and Czernek's workshops. "November 22, 1963 is the focal point for the coming disaster. Imagine the original temporal disturbance, the Kennedy assassination, is like a large rock thrown into a pool of water. . ."

"I thought we weren't using the stream metaphor," Ben interrupted.

"We aren't. I said water, not stream. I could just as easily analogize using radio waves of seismic vibrations, but the water analogy will be easier for you to understand. Time isn't a stream. A stream has a definite beginning and end. Time doesn't. Don't interrupt me or we won't get through this." Cooper hated to be rude to Ben, but he wanted to finish his explanation before they reached Building #22 and prevent Ben from following him into the lab. "From the focal point in 1963, the effects of the disturbance ripple out in waves across the time continuum. Now consider a wave in an ocean. The lunar force creating the wave causes the water in the oceans to rise and fall. As the wave moves through the ocean, it gains and maintains potential energy; as the wave nears land and the ocean becomes shallower, the wave becomes top heavy and collapses on the shore, releasing its energy." Ben's forehead knotted, as he struggled to complete the analogy. "Now imagine the effects of the 1963 disturbance as waves and our immediate future as the shore line."

“Then . . . you mean . . . the anomaly waves are about to break on us.”

“Correct.”

“Releasing their stored energy and causing disaster.”

“Correct again. You see, the anomalies have been occurring longer than most people think. For instance all those sightings in the 1970’s of the Sasquatch and the Loch Ness Monster were the earliest manifestations of the crisis. They’ve been occurring for over one hundred years, just infrequently. But as the waves near the shore and the water becomes shallower, the perturbations become more frequent and spectacular. And ultimately deadly. Do you understand, Ben? The time stream was fatally damaged over one hundred years ago by Kennedy’s assassination, but the effects haven’t fully been manifested until now.”

Ben could scarcely force himself to keep walking. Until now apocalyptic discussions had been purely theoretical. He was more frightened than at any time in his fifteen years in the FBI. Still he determined to remain as hard-boiled as he could.

“A, uh, pretty grim scenario Coop. What do we do about it?”

“I go back in time and prevent the Kennedy assassination.”

“Shouldn’t be too hard. You go back to Dallas and you knock Lee Harvey Oswald down before he can shoot Kennedy.”

“No it’s not going to be that easy, Ben. Most historians agree Oswald didn’t act alone, but can’t say with certainty where the other gunmen were or how many there might have been. So even if I turned Oswald into carbon cinders, Kennedy could still die. Worse than that, our time/space scans of 1963 reveal localized agitations in 1963 and 2087, distinct from the principle assassination disruptions.” Ben failed to react. “That means someone’s already traveling through time and, for whatever reasons, caused the death of John Kennedy, which will terminate the time space-continuum.”

Ben remained silent for the remainder of their walk to Building #22. Presenting their identification badges to the guard outside the main entrance, they entered the outer labs, housing small workshops and offices, essentially inactive since most of Cooper’s staff was working in the main lab, preparing the time machine for its first journey. They stopped before a pair of twenty foot high, grey, lead doors, separating the main lab from the rest of the building. Cooper punched a sequence of numbers and letters into a keyboard protruding from the wall and the doors groaned open with a hum of motors and gears. Dwarfed by the vault-like doors, Cooper and Ben watched the bright light of the main lab gradually part the lead monoliths and irradiate the outer corridor. Ben placed a firm grip on Adam’s shoulder. Neither man looked at the other as Ben turned and walked back the way they’d just come.

Cooper entered the main laboratory, ignoring the frantic activity.

Technicians dashed about amidst a maze of computers, workbenches and robot drones. Scientists huddled around computer readouts. Voices sounded from the direction of the cavernous lab, relaying test results, demanding different data, lamenting failures and celebrating successes. Oblivious to this chaos, Cooper eyed, with a pride and affection an artist has for his paintings, the large yellow sphere anchored in the middle of the lab. A hundred and fifty years of scientific theory, millions of dollars and a lifetime measured in sweat, frustration and obsession culminating in this nearly featureless steel and plastic sphere, twenty-five feet in diameter. Except for an access-portal and a crisscross of ladders and hand grippers, to facilitate servicing the curved exterior, the sphere possessed no distinguishing characteristics.

Blue overalled technicians swarmed over the craft like ants on a gum ball. A short pale man with poorly trimmed, dull brown hair coordinated their activity, yelling orders in a thick European accent. Carl Czernak, at 5'7" 130 lbs., appeared fragile, but while working in a lab, revealed a leather tough tenacity. In the fifteen years they had worked together, Adam never once regretted his seeking out this precocious young Czech who, at thirty-five years of age, enjoyed a planetary reputation for genius.

From his earliest conceptions of the time sphere, Adam knew that the computer system would be crucial to the sphere's success or failure. Piloting a time shift would require optical matrix computers—opticomps—computers constructed entirely from arrays of light photons, which could calculate at the required high speeds and maintain their structural integrity during transit. In 2076, Carl, only twenty-four years old already had an international reputation for genius and his work in opticomputers extended the cutting edge of the field. Knowing that the time sphere required systems beyond the capacity of existing computers, Adam forcefully recruited Carl as his research partner. Without Carl, the big yellow bubble would be as capable of time travel as an ox cart.

But despite their successful partnership, the two men never became friends, Czernak's quiet, introspective demeanor diametrically clashed with Adam's headstrong aggression. This conflict threatened their partnership from its inception. Although Carl was supposed to be an equal partner, Adam never treated him as such, often failing to consult him on decisions or doing so only perfunctorily. The partnership nearly fragmented over their joining Tempus Frangit. Carl opposed joining Tempus Frangit because he feared losing control of his work to the government. When Cooper committed their research effort to T.F. without consulting him, Czernak threatened to return to private research, agreeing to remain at the Institute only after receiving guarantees from the Institute, of patent retention and a pledge from Adam to consult him on all decisions affecting their partnership. Fifteen years of frustrating research further strained

the weak relationship, which by 2087 existed solely on intellectual respect and shared ambition.

“What’s wrong with her today, Carl?” Cooper asked approaching his partner from behind. Carl Czernak, glancing over his shoulder, muttered a distracted greeting. “Ah, so you are finished with the Science Council. Were you able to persuade those dullards of the danger they’re in or have you had to stoop to begging?” Cooper ignored Carl’s sarcasm, taking note instead of four engineers huddled around the critical null-gravity drive units. “Dammit, are the inducer cables still burning out?”

“We’re going to need an even thicker filament,” Czernak nodded affirmatively.

“That will raise the resistance unacceptably. Towers was right. We should have used synth-gold from the start. Have him call alchemy right away and have new coils made up.”

“You’ll have to tell him yourself, Adam. I have to test photon structures all along the on-board; I haven’t time to involve myself in propulsion problems.” Czernak was being especially hostile today, but Cooper didn’t fault him. They had been working grueling hours since Adam’s press conference. Adam walked to the drive unit and watched Towers, the aging gravity engineer, and another man, disconnect white hot inducer coils from their moorings, gingerly handling the searing cables with ceramic grippers. He waited until the two men climbed down from the drive unit and safely deposited the useless wire in a ceramic disposal bin before calling out. “Paul.” The engineer, his back turned to Cooper and bent over the spent coils, didn’t move. “Paul!” This time the grey haired engineer straightened himself and turned to face his supervisor. “Paul, I think we’re going to have to go with synth-gold for those inducers after all.”

Shaking his head in disgust, Towers pulled off his grippers and threw them to the floor. “I told you that months ago. You should listen to your staff once in awhile. We may not be famous geniuses but we sometimes know what we’re talking about.” Cooper absorbed Towers’ justified anger. “I’ll place an order with alchemy right away,” Towers said tugging his pants over his bulging stomach and walking towards his work station.

Cooper, too, moved to exit the main lab, heading towards the lockerroom to change into his lab clothes. He mentally outlined his work schedule. A fourth battery of tests needed to be run on the null-gravity units and an on-board supply list had to be completed. A call to William Stein, to check on the status of his students’ research, was also in order. Another absurdly busy day. Just as he reached the lockerroom a security guard, whom he hadn’t noticed chasing him across the lab, interrupted him. “Sir, Dr. Rosky is requesting your permission to enter the lab.”

Cooper swore.

The last person he needed to see now was Leonard Rosky, a chief rival in the race to break the time barrier. Having already lost half a day in Washington, Cooper didn't want to waste time with Rosky. But no good reason existed for keeping his rival out of the lab. Rosky's experiments on time travel via mathematically mapping the curves in fourth dimensional space were so different in scope and application from Cooper's work, neither man stood to gain from stealing the other's work. Cooper assumed that Rosky's curiosity prompted his visit and, as a professional favor, Cooper did not see how he could refuse Rosky's request.

"Should I send him away, sir?" the guard asked, still waiting for a response.

"No, let him in, sergeant." Considering the difficulty in winning presidential approval for his mission, Adam thought it wise to court members of his professional community. While he didn't expect Rosky to ever be supportive, hopefully he wouldn't actively oppose the mission.

The massive doors moaned open again, revealing Leonard Rosky, smoking a cigarette, shadowed in the comparatively dark corridor. Rosky extinguished the cigarette in the hall ashtray as Cooper, approaching the doorway, welcomed him. The rivals walked through the maze of workbenches, with Cooper carefully steering his visitor away from any of the more secretive projects. But from the moment he entered the lab, Rosky stared at the yellow sphere sitting in the middle of the lab.

"So you've actually made it round," Rosky said as they arrived at the base of the vehicle. "It's almost a cliché, Adam. Was Jules Verne your architect?" Rosky didn't smile at his own weak attempt at humor. The scientist's appearance shocked Adam. How unhealthy he looked. His knotted hair needed washing, his skin was an unhealthy yellow and the skin under his eyes was puffy and black. Since Adam's press conference, Rosky, beside himself with envy and desperate to complete his own research, worked even longer hours than Cooper and Czernak. His schedule was killing him. But he had to continue. If the time sphere succeeded, his entire career would be in vain.

"As you're aware, the shape of an object hardly matters as far as time travel is concerned. And the circular design more readily accommodates the continuous circuitry flow. More importantly, the sphere occupies space more efficiently than a square or rectangle. Since the null-gravity field expands circularly, it can encompass the vehicle like a coat of paint, thus requiring only as much power as absolutely necessary. Plus, with an angular construction, the circular null-grav field would extend beyond the vehicle itself, increasing the risk factor by transporting excess atmosphere and anything that might wander into the field."

Rosky shook his head slowly from side to side as they walked around the time sphere. Laser torches flared as technicians strengthened spot

welds along the ship's hull. Czernak's accent drifted out of the sphere's only opening, guiding assistants through tests on the ship's computers. Other voices spoke and machines hummed, clanked, beeped and buzzed. Rosky remained wearily calm. "So you still plan on using a null-gravity field to induce light speed. Have you tested this method of yours even once?" Cooper hesitated, he did not want to joust with Rosky over theory. "The null-grav field is achievable Leonard. We've produced them dozens of times in the lab and I'm certain the opticomps will manipulate them with the precision required for time travel."

"So you haven't tested it!?" Rosky was both surprised and pleased. "You tell the world you have mastered time and you haven't successfully transported even an inanimate object as much as a minute into the past or future?" Adam remained silent. "My impetuous friend, that is hardly sound method. I hope, when you attempt this bold mission of yours, you don't make a fool — or a corpse of yourself."

"I don't plan on being either. The sphere will work, Leonard." Adam wasn't nearly as confident as he seemed. Rosky was right: not testing the time sphere was unsound method and extremely dangerous. But with disaster swelling nearer with each day, he had no time for safety or method. And no more time for Leonard Rosky. "I wish I could provide a more comprehensive tour Leonard. But I have a great deal to accomplish today. . ."

"I understand, Adam. But before I leave I must explain. The reason for my visit extends beyond curiosity. I came here to confirm doubts I had about your theory and slipshod method. Doubts which led myself and some of the others to take action."

"Action? . . . What have you done, Leonard?" Cooper's heart jumped and he felt as though a null-grav field formed in his stomach.

"This morning I transmitted a letter to President Grant, signed by myself and sixteen others from the Institute, stating our opposition to your premature and ill-considered mission and outlining our disagreements with your theory. I felt honor and courtesy required that I inform you of this."

"You bastards! Out of jealousy you'd oppose my efforts without even giving them a chance. For God's sake the whole time continuum's unraveling and you're playing politics!" Cooper could barely master his fury, fighting to keep from wrapping his hands around Rosky's bony neck. "What good's your research going to be if the world's ending. Jesus! are you really that myopic, you can't see beyond your own situation?"

Most of the technicians nearby stopped working, their attention drawn by Cooper's fury. Sensing he might be in physical danger, Rosky backed towards the exit. "I too have much work to do." The darkness of the corridor embraced Rosky, as the doors laboriously slid closed. Cooper's hands twitched at his side in spasms of rage. With only their testimony

before the President remaining, Adam believed that he and Carl had neutralized most of their opposition, except for Bazelon. Now to find that so many of T.F's own staff opposed him Their letter opened whole new fronts for Bazelon to attack him along and with only one session for Cooper and Czernak to counter the damage, Rosky and his jealous cohorts may well have doomed the mission.

Chapter 3

Alexander Blue stared out the window of his United Nations office at the wintry Tuesday evening, his reflection in the glass superimposed over the icy East River. An ice-breaker rammed its way through the several feet of ice covering the river. From his fifteenth floor perch he saw the figures of men scurrying across the ship's deck. Although the ice breakers employ a range of high tech tools, including a heated hull capable of attaining temperatures in excess of 150 degrees and small lasers honeycombing the ice, the crew's work remained physically demanding. Alex envied the crew their vitality, imagining the cold wind blowing off the river, constricting skin and muscle into a single tightly knit fiber. He considered the combination of strength and agility necessary for working on a boat—lifting, climbing, tugging, pulling—that was work. You were tired at the end of the day, but replenished as well, as though your body shared in the barge's vitality as it bruted its way through the frozen river. You altered the earth, broke the ice to your will and as you poured yourself into the job, you spirited away a portion of the energy released from the clash of mechanical and natural forces.

Turning from the window, Alex glanced around his office at the densely-packed bookshelves behind his desk, the leather sofa and matching chairs, a second set of shelves across from his desk, housing personal items—holos of Patty and the kids, a photo of Martin Luther King Jr.—and a television set: hardly different from hundreds of other offices in the U.N. Building. There was no exchange of energies here. No clash of primal forces. Only a constant drain on his spirits, his vitality absorbed into the grey walls and swept away in the endless stream of paper rolling past his position on the bureaucratic conveyor belt. Clerks do the research, lower level staffers write the reports, which he edits and has rewritten or approves and sends on to his superiors. He felt part of an assembly line churning out the product of diplomacy.

What had he produced in over twenty years in the diplomatic corps? As a young man anxious to play a role in world statecraft, he thoughtfully addressed the issues, believing that the United Nations in general and

he specifically could make a difference in the world. But no matter how clever or incisive his reports, the assembly line flayed away all traces of individuality, devolving his work into the product of the bureaucracy. After twenty-two years he wondered how much of Alex Blue remained. At forty-six the crescent of hair still on his head was overrun with grey, as was his beard. A little over six foot, he still appeared fit, but his muscles had long grown soft. After years of trying to buck the system, he surrendered and conformed to the complacent dynamic of the U.N. diplomatic corps.

As head of the British mission's delegation to the U.N. World Information Agency, Alex had an impressive title but little influence. The WIA, through a network of reporters, provides video and print news and information via satellite news feeds and a wire service, for member nations. But since the developed countries are served by their own internal journalistic resources, the WIA's only customers are the smaller, technologically underdeveloped countries. As part of the editorial committee, Alex ostensibly played a role in determining the editorial content of the agency's stories and reports. But Third World delegates dominated the WIA directorate and staff, exercising absolute veto power over the substance of the reporting, often placing their own agenda above the principles of a free press. Alex spent much of his days endlessly haggling with his superiors over the ideology of the WIA's reporting.

A gentle knocking at his door stirred Alex from his musing. "Come in," he called, reaffixing his attention on the moment. As he sank into his pillowy desk chair, the office door opened admitting his secretary Carol, a pretty, fragile, thin blonde of twenty-four, burdened by a stack of file folders. "Sorry to bother you." Her voice rang with a professionally courteous melody. "You have to sign these. They're story proposals, expense vouchers and bureau reports." She dumped the stack of folders onto his desk with a shy, apologetic smile, sharply pivoted and exited the office, leaving behind a soft scent of talcum and perfume. Alex gripped the stack of folders with both hands and spun them around to face him.

He thumbed through the pages of proposed stories—a preview of a Third World literacy council study in Brasilia, analysis of parliamentary elections in New Palestine, coverage of multinational corporate guerrilla strikes in the Mediterranean—none of which Alex could bring himself to read. To him these stories always contained an element of futility, but with the time crisis threatening the world, elections and guerrilla wars became insignificant. Glancing only at the stationary headings, Alex signed his way through the papers. Within ten minutes, his fingers slightly cramped, Alex closed the folder, flipped his pen to the desk and leaned back in his chair.

He glared at the flashing red message light on the picta-phone, reminding him of the day's final unpleasantry: returning a call to Jonathan

Mogastu, the young Liberian head of the WIA. With a dull dread, he punched Mogastu's code into the phone's keyboard and within seconds the sharp featured, youthful face of his superior filled the screen. "Good evening, Jonathan. I assume you read the transcript of the special report on the violence in Khalistan."

"I have, Alex, and I'm sending it back for revision. As it stands the piece is incendiary and biased in favor of reactionary opinions with little sensitivity to delicate security concerns of the Bhindranwale regime."

Alex tried to brace himself for Mogastu's polemics, but his will for these confrontations was waning. "Jonathan, Bhindranwale had fifteen people publicly beheaded as heretics? How in God's name do you suggest we report that without being critical of his rule. Since the Indian dissolution in '65 Khalistan's been the most consistently violent of the new commonwealths."

Mogastu continued as though Alex hadn't spoke. "The report, as it is, completely ignores the provocations by seditious elements in Khalistan and religious minorities seeking to pervert the will of the Sikh majority. The conditions in Kalistan are remarkably similar to those which originally caused the Indian disintegration. This report gives no mention of the extreme circumstances in which Bhindranwale is attempting to govern. Moreover, as we both know, the new commonwealths were created to be national expressions of religious identities. . . ." Mogastu's words flooded from the picta-phone but Alex no longer listened. No matter how long or skillfully he argued, Mogastu would not release the report until Alex removed all sharp indictments of the Bhindranwale regime. The only matter in doubt was how long Alex would resist. "Send me the story, Jonathan, and I'll see what I can do to make it more accurate," he capitulated, turning off the picta-phone in disgust, at Mogastu and at himself. Fortunately it was nearly four o'clock and he wouldn't have to edit the story until tomorrow.

Leaning back in his chair, he lifted the morning *New York Times* from his desk and read the story on the latest time anomaly. A tragedy. A German World War II Luftwaffe bomber appeared over London and dropped its payload on a hospital, killing 17 and wounding 40 others. The anomalies had a way of reminding you of the danger they portended.

The article made Alex think of his friend Adam Cooper, who was front and center in the struggle to understand the anomalies. The two men met when they attended prep school together at the Mt. Havey Academy in Southbridge, Connecticut. As a scholarship student from a working class section of London, Alex had difficulty adapting to the blueblood world of the academy. Adam, likewise on scholarship, encountered similar social barriers at Havey, among the sons and daughters of the aristocracy. Thus the two young men from the middle class, subtly but unmistakably

alienated from the school establishment, formed a solid friendship. Since Alex's assignment to the United Nations, the two friends met once a month for lunch, Alex taking the bullet train to Boston, or Adam traveling to Manhattan.

Alex traced his training for the diplomatic corp back to his matriculation at the academy where he had to overcome class and cultural barriers. For Alex, skillful social interaction required a blend of tact, grace and restraint of a then-restless temper. Desperately wanting to fit in, Alex learned to tailor his personality and behavior to his perception of what people wanted him to be. The values of the other Mt. Havey students became his values. He tried out for the rowing team, although he didn't care for the sport; he espoused political views he didn't fully support; he attended the cotillions and formals. Although he befriended a number of boys in the academy, he never became one of them. Adam, on the other hand, made no concessions to his peers, whom he considered his inferiors in everything but economic status, and often chided his friend for making such an effort to enter Havey society. "We're tokens here, Alex. Given scholarships so that the school can assuage its liberal conscience. But don't think for a minute we've gained admittance to their caste. Just take advantage of what they're offering." Of course, Adam was consumed in his studies and had little interest in a social life. For Alex, it was harder. He vowed someday that he would prove to the snobs at Havey that the son of a working class Englishman could succeed as well as an American aristocrat. This desire to prove himself led him to the diplomatic corps where he expected the importance and glamour of his work would enable him to earn distinction.

Ironically, Adam, who never sought Havey's approval, became the alumnus celebré when his pioneering time travel experiments began to bear fruit. The school extended annual lecture invitations, dedicated an Adam Cooper wing of the science center and bestowed upon him an honorary professorship. Adam's almost inadvertent achievement of what Alex passionately sought neatly summarized his diplomatic career, Alex thought: a string of unrealized ambitions and stalled initiatives. And now with the world perhaps coming to an end, he had little initiative or ambition to attempt to change his legacy. He envied his friend Adam more now than he ever had. Adam Cooper may die like the rest of us, he thought to himself, but he'll have gone to his grave fighting.

Chapter 4

“Elizabeth Grant is an unimaginative political hack, who got elected by avoiding any controversy.” Carl Czernak’s European accent cracked as he spoke. Checking and rechecking the contents of his briefcase, Carl sat on a sofa in Adam’s cluttered office, the desk, vid-screen and computer station gradually disappearing beneath glaciers of paper creeping through the room. A pile of worn and unworn clothes testified to the long hours Cooper was spending here. Adam sat behind his desk listening to his partner’s anxious appraisal of the President’s abilities. “I don’t understand politics, but I know her type. She’s all compromise. She isn’t capable of bold decisions and we need a bold decision. Now.”

“You’re overstating things as usual, Carl. Grant’s not that bad. Hell, I voted for her.” Adam stood up from his desk chair, carefully smoothing the wrinkles from his suit. Having completed their testimony to the President’s committee of scientific advisers, the two researchers nervously prepared to take the bullet train to Washington D.C. for a formal and decisive briefing to President Grant, where the President would, hopefully, approve Adam and Carl’s proposed mission to save Kennedy. “Not much we can do about her. Imagination or no, she is the President. Besides, we’re halfway to success already. She recognizes the anomalies as a danger. We just have to convince her that we hold the answers.”

“Do we really hold the answers Adam? Rosky’s right. We haven’t tested anything. Doesn’t that bother you? We don’t truly know what’s going to happen when we engage the time sphere. We’ve run simulations and monitored the continuum but when we try to shift we could disappear into the continuum, or the matrix stabilizers could fail and our atoms would just scatter in the temporal winds. We don’t know Adam. We see the danger more clearly than most, but may be just as helpless.

“Does anybody else offer a better chance?” Adam sought to rally his partner’s spirits. This wasn’t the time for doubt. “Do Rosky or Bazelon? We do know. We know Kennedy shouldn’t have died and we know someone caused his death. And we’re as sure as we can be that the time sphere will work. So forgive me for being confident, but I think we have a right to be.”

Adam's attempt at a pep talk failed to lift his partner's spirits.

Carl sagged against his desk. "I'm a scientist. I only want to do research. I am not a brave or daring man. I don't want to be responsible for the cosmos, Adam." Adam studied his partner, not noticing until now Carl's appearance. He looked as bad as Leonard Rosky had and he'd lost fifteen to twenty pounds in the last month and a half. He'd been keeping up with Adam's work pace since the press conference, but he lacked Adam's stamina. Adam approached Carl and placed his arm under his shoulder, pulling him up. "I didn't ask for this either, Carl. We do the best we can. That's all. Now you're going to have to pull yourself together because this is going to be even harder than we thought. Between Rosky's letter and Bazelon's opposition we have quite a battle ahead."

"Yes . . . yes," Carl straightened himself, "I'm just tired, that's all."

"I know, so am I."

"Well, even though we know much of what Bazelon plans to say, I don't see how we can refute some of it." Carl began to focus back on the problem. "Obviously he'll attack us with the dual-self paradox and no matter how we contest it, the President's sure to be confused."

"He'll do all he can to cloud the issue. The President's not a scientist. If Bazelon confuses her she might rule against us or postpone her decision for too long. Why's he doing this?" Adam asked in a frustrated refrain he'd been singing throughout their private testimony. "Legitimate skepticism is one thing. But Irwin's acting as though he has a personal stake in our failure. I can't believe that all this stems from jealousy." Adam removed two jackets from a closet, handing one to Carl and pulling the other on.

"Irwin was as driven a scientist as we are," Carl observed as he slipped into his coat. "Our success is his failure."

Adam shook his head. "There's more. It's as if he wants the anomalies to continue."

Carl looked at his partner, "You're thinking that perhaps Irwin is the other time traveler. I've thought that too."

"I don't know. But something's there." Adam shrugged, then changed the subject. "Remember today to control the flow of the debate, keep it focused and as simple as possible." Adam knew that Carl was a poor speaker, often assuming his audience knew more science than it did. Adam hoped he alone could control the flow of the debate. "Use as little jargon and technical language as possible and talk directly to the President." The two picked up their briefcases and walked out of their office to catch a shuttle to the train station, anxiously practicing answers they knew by memory.

The sky tram glided on its track over Pennsylvania Avenue, stopping at the private White House Station. The secret service had decided

that commandeering an entire tram car would permit Adam and Carl to enter the White house without encountering the crowd of demonstrators gathered on Pennsylvania Avenue, three stories below. Although supposedly top secret, news of Adam's and Carl's meeting with the President leaked to the media, creating a mob of demonstrators. Although the White House saw a daily parade of pickets, since Adam's press conference, the arrival of the famed temporal scientists inspired a swelling crowd of chanting, hollering demonstrators. Looking down from his window seat, Carl observed the frenzy. Police waving electrically charged truncheons patrolled a twenty-foot-wide corridor dividing the protestors into two groups: those supporting the Cooper/Czernak mission, made up mostly of time travel support groups and enthusiasts such as the People for a Temporal Way, the Hourmen and the Eternity Watchers, and those groups opposed to time travel in general, including the Carpe Diem Society. Mixed with the anti-time travel groups were members of the Brother and Sisterhood of the Abyss, a cult of doom-sayers anticipating the end of the world. "Well," he mused, "Apocalypse certainly is something worth taking to the streets over."

The car doors parted, allowing Adam and Carl to disembark at the White House Station where two secret service agents, wearing identical suits and sporting the same haircuts and similar features greeted them. "When did they start cloning these guys?" Adam thought to himself as the agents led them to a private elevator, which descended from the track to a tunnel three stories below the White House lawn. Adam and Carl followed the S.S. clones through the subterranean tunnel which branched off into dozens of smaller tunnels, alive with White House personnel moving from office to office. Carl glanced about in amazement. "I never imagined that the tunnels under the White House were this extensive."

"I reacted the same way the first time I was down here," Adam nodded. "According to Ben, everything except the Oval Office, the Cabinet Room and some public briefing rooms were moved underground during the Pan American War, to guard against nuclear attack."

After walking for nearly five minutes, the secret service agents stopped before a door simply marked "Briefing Room". One of the agents opened the door and ushered Adam and Carl into a narrow room with two long rectangular tables parallel to one another and roughly twelve feet apart. A trio of vid-screens, extra chairs, a pair of writing desks and a globe, lined the perimeter of the room. A painting of President Grant adorned the wall behind the far table which was flanked by two American flags draped over seven foot tall flagpoles. "Have a seat, gentlemen. The President will be with you shortly." Adam and Carl sat at the nearest table. President Grant's green eyes stared down at them from her oil painting.

After fifteen nervous minutes, the door hummed and slid open, and

President Grant, followed by an entourage entered the room. The President, a tall graceful woman of 53 occupied the seat in the middle of the table, obscuring her painted image with the real thing. Assuming the seat to her right was the bulky, bearded Irwin Bazelon, Adam's and Carl's chief scientific nemesis. Sitting to the President's left were Perry Colonsantos, a short delicate optical matrix engineer, and propulsion and gravity field expert James Cartney, a tall black man wearing an ill-fitting suit. The President spoke first.

"I've already consulted closely with Drs. Bazelon, Colonsantos and Cartney but I still have a number of questions I'd like to hear you answer." The President's voice was a flat monotone. Although her advisers insist she is warm and funny in private, Elizabeth Grant was publicly dull and plodding. "I believe you have a statement you'd like to read, Dr. Cooper."

Adam looked down at the large lettered, double spaced, typed document summarizing his and Carl's arguments. Adam realized that his report would seem child-like to the three scientists sitting at the opposing table, but Carl and he had crafted their report for a one person audience — Elizabeth Grant. Adam didn't doubt that the President had conscientiously studied the briefings. But the many reports and the transcripts of his and Carl's testimony often delved into complex and obscure scientific and philosophical concepts and Adam didn't want to gamble the mission on assumptions about the President's powers of comprehension. Having memorized his speech, Adam ignored the paper in front of him and gazed directly at the President as he spoke. "Madame President, distinguished panel. In 1963 Lee Harvey Oswald and an unidentified number of accomplices assassinated President John Kennedy, an event that didn't happen and shouldn't have happened in the normal course of time. Kennedy's death terminally disrupted the time continuum, creating the anomalies which currently threaten us. So that you can better understand how Kennedy's death created the anomalies, I need to convey our understanding of the structure of the time continuum, using 2087 as a past/future point of reference."

"The time continuum operates under what Carl and I call retro-Newtonianism. The intricate web of events forming what we see as the past result from an interacting of cause and effect in which an observer can trace the antecedents of a given event. But the causality is not totalitarian. Although we can recognize the causal patterns in the past by merely looking over our temporal shoulders, we, paradoxically, can't extrapolate future events based on the behavior of the past. So while the past appears to remain inviolate from a given reference point, the future is indeterminate from the same reference point, depending on the results of a random causality."

Adam feared his explanation was getting away from his audience.

He relaxed and continued. "In simpler terms, any given moment forms the end result of the uncountable series of events prior to the present moment. From this present moment the future can branch off into one of an infinite number of pathways. For example, the future will be different if I stop delivering my speech and walk out of the room or drop dead instead of completing my testimony. Each possibility would cause the time continuum to move in a slightly different direction. From January 2087 we can look at a period in time, say 2080 to 2081, and see events move in one incontrovertible path from among the infinite paths it might have taken. If a person could go back in time and alter an event, he could shift the time continuum to an alternative and illegitimate probability, with wrenching effects. The larger the change, the greater the disturbance.

For instance, if I were to go back in time and burn down a house that shouldn't burn, I would create a disturbance in the time stream, but probably not one big enough to noticeably affect time. But if I were to alter a chronal nexus, one of the crucial stress loci in the continuum's structure, something like the Kennedy assassination, I would dramatically alter the course of apparently established events."

The President rubbed her forefinger between her nose and lip and slowly nodded her head, absorbing Adam's explanation. "Yes, I looked at the data you provided supporting your Kennedy conclusion."

Carl nodded his head, but Adam spoke first.

"Our temporal scanners can easily detect the disturbances in the continuum created by the anomalies, for the energy patterns are quite distinctive. The perturbations circa 1963 are mammoth, easily exceeding the effects of subsequent anomalies. Additionally, no disturbances of that magnitude occur after 1963. The Kennedy assassination jolted the time continuum, emitting chronal quakes along the continuum until 2087, when time is so destabilized it threatens to collapse. 1963 is a crossing point year. Everything behind it remains viable history; everything since exhibits a volatile instability."

"So you say, Dr. Cooper, but why do so few of your colleagues support the results of your time scans or your claims to having mastered time travel? Indeed some, like Drs. Bazelon and Rosky openly oppose your methods and conclusions."

Cooper winced at the overtly political perspective of the President's question. "Madame President, scientific method necessarily advances slowly. Confirmation of all but the most obvious claims rarely occurs by immediate acclamation, particularly in this case where none of our colleagues' research has advanced to the stage Carl's and mine has. With the exception, of course, of whoever traveled back to 1963 and killed John Kennedy."

"Yes," the President shifted forward in her chair, her energy rising.

“You claimed in your news conference to be the first man to break the time barrier, but in your testimony you say someone has already done it. Where did this person come from, Dr. Cooper? How did he invent a time machine in complete isolation from the rest of the scientific community and without the knowledge of the government?”

“The identity of this other time shifter and his means of travel mystify me as well, Madame President. I only know he exists and he has set into motion the events that threaten the destruction of time. Our time scans reveal localized disturbances in 1963 and 2087, distinct from the energy patterns caused by the Kennedy assassination. These readings can only indicate a time traveler exiting and re-entering the time continuum, traveling from 2087 to 1963 or from 1963 to 2087, although the latter possibility seems unlikely.”

“Of course, due to the havoc in the continuum caused by the anomalies, your scans between 1963 and 2087 are of dubious value,” Irwin Bazelon interjected. “The battle is joined,” Adam thought.

“Not so, Dr. Bazelon. I’ve provided you with the results of comparable data from pre-1963 time scans and if you’ve looked at them they indicate that the variable of error in the post-63 scans is only slightly higher.” Cooper turned his attention back to President Grant. “You don’t need scientific data to tell you the danger. The anomalies grow more frequent and intense by the day, until they’ve reached a crisis stage. The solution is deceptively simple: using the time sphere, Carl, I and a team of agents travel to 1963 and prevent the Kennedy assassination.”

“I’m well aware of the national crisis we’re facing and yes your solution does sound so easy, doesn’t it?” the President said in a skeptical voice as she looked at an open briefing book. “Your presentations, both oral and written, are quite emphatic and convincing, but serious conflicts exist between your opinions and those of your colleagues and I’d like to address some of these. For instance, Dr. Czernak, do I understand that you intend to transform the time machine and crew into particles of light before entering the time continuum?”

Czernak cleared his throat and spoke for the first time. “The ship and crew will transform into light particles by the time shifting process. It is not something I’m doing as a matter of intention. The conversion of mass to energy is a result of our inducing a null-gravity field.”

“You mean you can’t travel through time without turning into light particles?” the President asked, more confused than helped by Carl’s answer.

“Perhaps there are means of time shifting without particle transformation. But in our situation, where we induce time shifting through the generation of a null-gravity field, the transformation is unavoidable.” Adam grew frustrated. Carl’s answers were too unstructured; he was

omitting important information and ignoring their basic strategy—to simplify.

Adam broke in, “Perhaps, Madame President, you’ll understand the particle transformation better within the context of time shifting in general. As I attempted to explain in my reports to you, our experiments center on faster-than-light travel. The time sphere generates a field of null-gravity, radiating from the center of the ship, to encompass the vehicle like a coat of paint. The mass of anything within the null-grav field moves to zero and it automatically travels at the speed of light. Once we achieve null-grav, the difficulties lie in first manipulating the field properly in order to navigate a path to the intended era and, secondly, maintaining the structural integrity of the objects within the field. Any object stripped of its mass becomes amorphous energy — light. Carl’s light-based computers solve both the navigation and structural problems.

“Since it consists entirely of a series of controlled light pathways, an opticomputer can sustain its structural integrity during the journey through the time continuum. Thus Carl can program them to manipulate the gravity field and store the matrices for the time sphere and the individuals on-board. When the sphere emerges at its destination along the continuum, the computers ease the null-grav field, reintroducing mass and insuring the correct reassembling of the matrices.”

Dr. Colonsantos interjected, “With due respect for Dr. Czernak’s genius and acknowledging his leadership in the field of opticomputers, I must express some doubt over the effects that faster-than-light travel will have on the computer. I’ve examined the blueprints you’ve provided, Carl, and I am impressed. They contain innovations and technologies I have never encountered before and for that reason I can’t in good conscience fully support your mission. Using artificial intelligence of revolutionary complexity, you demand they perform extraordinarily delicate operations with absolute precision under unknown conditions. I realize a crisis exists, but your reports indicate you’re not sure exactly what effect the continuum will have on the opticomps. If the time shift compromises their integrity to any degree or throws off their calculations by the slightest fraction, you and the sphere could emerge in ancient Rome or Renaissance England. Or worse, the matrices could scramble, causing a disastrously failed reassembling of ship and crew. This morning we received a telex from Dr. Leonard Rosky and a number of your colleagues at Tempus Frangit, impugning your methods as unsound and your results as untested. I’m afraid they may be right. Although I support your mission, I believe we should wait and test your experiments further.”

“Dr. Colonsantos understates the problem. You offer no empirical support whatsoever for your theories.” Irwin Bazelon took up Colonsantos’ cue with a vengeance. Adam knew that Bazelon wouldn’t continue

to hold back much longer. “When I was an active researcher, gentleman, my work paralleled yours in a number of ways and I’m skeptical of some of the philosophical and technical assumptions you’ve made. For instance, I am curious about your perception of the time continuum. You claim you can go back in time. What about the future? Can you travel forward in time? Your report to the President doesn’t address that issue.”

Adam hesitated. He deliberately omitted discussion of the twisted paradoxes of time travel to avoid confusing the President. But Bazelon’s question shifted the discussion into just such an esoteric issue irrelevant to the debate concerning the Kennedy mission. Worse, Bazelon phrased the question to give the appearance that he and Carl were trying to hide something. “Travel into the future from a given “when” is problematic. From 2087 I can travel to any point in the past, 1963 for example and from 1963 I can travel ahead to any year preceding my native time, in this case, 2087. But anything occurring beyond 2087 has yet to occur from our temporal point of reference. Since present actions create the future, it’s impossible to pinpoint viable time from the infinite possible futures, except for limited glimpses into the short term future, such as with ESPers, because the number of probabilities decrease. But to actually make a journey from 2087 to 2088 defies present capabilities. You can’t knock on the door of a house that has yet to be built.”

“But you can travel backwards because all those events have happened already?” the President asked, her mind furiously running to keep up with Cooper.

Bazelon answered before Adam could speak. “You’re rejecting the determinist view then? Supported by the giants of temporal theory — Tindinovitch, Stone, Columbari — whose models drew upon the work of Newton, Einstein and Hawking?”

“All name-dropping aside, those scientist’s models sprung from brilliant intuition.” Adam was aggravated by Bazelon’s invoking past scientific legends. “For all their undeniable genius those men didn’t possess a fraction of the empirical evidence we have thanks to our ability to scan the time continuum.” Adam spoke directly to the President again. “Madame President, I’ve tried to express the results of our data as best I can, based on our scans of the unique energy patterns released by the continuum. We can monitor its fluctuations and pinpoint coordinates and understand its dynamics, but we never actually see it and I can’t draw a picture of it except by analogy, but neither can Dr. Bazelon or anyone else.”

“But no one else claims they can travel through time, do they?” Point for Bazelon, thought Carl. “You claim post-’87 time is accessible. What happens if I go back to, say 2083. Would I be able to meet myself? Could I be in two places at once?” Adam and Carl braced themselves — it

was dual-self paradox time. Bazelon's question raised one of the oldest and most elusive time travel paradoxes. Two schools of thought existed on the question: the purely scientific view which insisted that no object could occupy two spaces at the same time, and the phenomenological theory which held that a person from two different times is in fact two different people and therefore could meet himself. Both Adam and Carl tended to lean towards accepting the scientific view, although neither of them had resolved the paradox, resolution possible only through actually traveling to the past and trying to shake your own hand.

"The question is irrelevant, since we propose to travel 124 years into the past, long before any of us were born," Carl futilely hoped to preempt Bazelon's use of the dual-self paradox.

"But it's not irrelevant, Dr. Czernak. Let us extend the paradox. Current theory states that a person's cells and organs and blood can't exist in more than one place at a time, that we can't meet ourselves and travel to anytime where we previously existed."

"Actually," all eyes turned to James Cartney as he broke his silence, "the biological position has been modified in a recent paper by Phillip Cochran of Stanford. He observed the medical fact that every seven years the body completely regenerates its cellular structure, gradually replacing old cells with new ones, until at the end of a given seven year period, the body's cells are entirely different from the beginning of the seven years. Thus Cochran postulates the only times off limits to a past-destined traveler would be the seven years immediately previous to the when of departure."

"But if the two selves were to encounter one another, the dissonance caused by the identical cranial vibratory frequencies could kill both selves, or would kill the same self twice depending on how you see it," Bazelon countered.

"But I don't think we can omit the metaphysical," Dr. Colonsantos rejoined. "Are we just a collection of cells and chemical reactions? Does the soul exist? And if it does can it animate the same person twice simultaneously?" Adam and Carl exchanged worried glances. Bazelon had succeeded in devolving the discussion into obscure temporal shop talk, with the President intellectually swamped in the middle.

Adam tried to jerk the conversation back on course. "I think, gentlemen, this discussion indicates the enduring frustration of the dual-self paradox. Perhaps my next mission will be to attempt to meet myself. But there won't be any me to meet if I don't have Presidential approval for this mission."

"But the paradox, fully extended, questions the viability of your mission," Bazelon persisted. "Your presence in 1963 would violate the law of conservation of mass which proclaims an inviolate amount of matter in the universe. The matter which forms Adam Cooper in 2087 existed

in some form in 1963. The question beyond 'can you exist in two places at once?' is: 'can your matter exist in two places at once?' "

The President's brow furrowed, as Carl leaned forward to address the question. "Based on our observations of the time anomalies, we believe that the thermodynamic structure can sustain the presence of additional matter for an estimable duration."

"Simplify and explain Carl," Adam thought to himself. "And how long would the safe period be?" the President asked.

"The time anomalies prove that an out-of-time object can exist in non-native time. They don't explode or immediately dissipate whenever they appear. Undoubtedly the anomalies destabilize the continuum, with the amount of damage dependent on the significance of the anomaly. For instance, the instability caused by the manifesting of a Ming vase in this briefing room would be insignificant and tolerable. But an anomaly on the scale of a World War One army battalion appearing in 2080 France would further destabilize time. The anomalies we're seeing now are symptoms of an ill continuum.

"Based on our examination of the anomalies — their size, duration and temporal readings — we've calculated out-of-time stress factors for various organic and inorganic systems. Our results indicate that a human being could maintain himself in the past for at least a week before seriously threatening the stability of the thermodynamic structure."

"So we would have one week to save President Kennedy," the President stated.

"Correct," Adam and Carl both nodded.

"This may seem a ridiculous question, but . . . if a group of agents failed to stop the assassination within a week's time, why couldn't they simply return to 2087 and keep going back to 1963, reliving the week until they succeed."

"Because the time traveler would die," Bazelon pointedly beat Adam or Carl to the punch.

"Dammit, Irwin. It's one thing for you to oppose me with sound argument, but I won't tolerate demagoguery. Why are you so opposed to me? Are you so jealous of my work because you feel I deprived you a share of the credit? Are you so bitter you'd let hate of me blind you to the danger we face?" Adam glared at Bazelon and his hands writhed in anger across the table. Carl placed a cautioning hand on Adam's shoulder, the angered scientist falling silent but still glaring at his rival, who glared back.

Carl, suppressing his own anger, spoke in a measured voice. "The body loses small amounts of energy during each flesh-to-light transformation. Repeat trips in too short a period, where the body would lack time to compensate for the energy loss, would cause serious illness or death."

The answer seemed to satisfy the President. "Another thing bothering me," she continued, "What's to prevent the actions of our time travelers from further upsetting history and creating greater anomalies?" Bazelon smiled and Carl wondered how many of the President's questions were prompted by Bazelon.

"Obviously the time traveler needs to be cautious in interacting with native time," Carl continued, as Adam fumed in his chair. "And of course we would have to be sure not to strand any time travelers in the past, because, as we discussed earlier, their extended presence would be intolerable to the thermodynamic system."

Adam couldn't restrain himself any longer. No more begging. "The mission is dangerous, Madame President. It's dangerous for those of us going back and it's dangerous for the time continuum. But the danger is greater and for more people if the mission's not undertaken. Carl and I have analyzed the situation and decided that the margin of risk is acceptable." Adam looked the President full in the eye, challenging.

"Yes. Well I appreciate your confidence in your work, Dr. Cooper," the President met his stare, "but the issue is whether I'm willing to let you take the risks. Dr. Cooper, Dr. Czernak, you leave me with a great decision. Be assured I am aware of the nature of the problem we face and whatever I decide will be in what I believe is the nation's best interest and that I'll have devoted much thought and prayer to it. This hearing is concluded. You will be summoned to return when I have made my decision."

The President rose from her desk, approached the witness table and, barely breaking stride, shook both men's hands before exiting, with her matching Secret Service guards a step behind her.

Chapter 5

The floor vibrated as the music from the pipe organ filled the spaces between the members of the congregation. The several hundred Apocalyptes and church members fixed anticipatory gazes on the circular yellow dais at the center of the temple. The music, pulsing and operatic, isolated each worshiper in the void of its volume, even as it linked the congregation to its gradually forming crescendo. Nearly imperceptibly the crowd began swaying from side-to-side, unconsciously attuning itself to the organ's vibrations.

A chant began murmuring from the rear of the crowd, a low back beat to the music, and quickly spread to the whole of the congregation.

“Doom. Doom. Doom. Doom.”

Spurred by the compliment of the chant, the organ became more intense, the music furiously racing to a climactic finish, the congregation loudly chasing it.

“Doom! Doom! Doom! Doom!”

Surging toward the dais, the crowd hurled its emotional energy through the music towards the empty platform. When the demonstration had reached near-frenzied levels, an oval section of the dais slid to one side, revealing a narrow elevator shaft through which the imposing figure of the Highfather rose on a disc which joined seamlessly with the surface of the dais.

He stood draped in the crimson cape of his ceremonial costume. His face covered behind the tomb-like face of the gray Doom Mask he wore when preaching. Walking about the platform, he surveyed the faces circling him and as he did, their chanting gave way to a reverent but restless quiet.

Returning to the middle of the dais, he spoke. “My loyal believers,” his voice resonant, but vaguely nasal, carried to the farthest corners of

the temple, "the anomalies are your friends. Welcome them." A cheer thundered in answer, followed by a smattering of "Doom" chants.

"For nearly a century, the Brother and Sisterhood of the Abyss has foretold this moment; has warned of the catastrophe and the need for mankind to reconcile its amoral behavior with the coming doom."

"Scientists seek to explain the anomalies. They use sensors and microwave scanners and light computers to probe the cosmos for a glimpse of our God. They shall not find him. Some believe the anomalies are less than apocalyptic. They are wrong. There are some who have faced the full implications of the time crisis and believe they can defy the will of our God. They shall fail!" His voice bellowed as he thrust his arms above his head, the cape falling off his shoulders revealing his ornate gold and scarlet vestments. The crowd erupted.

"Doom! Doom! Doom! Doom!"

The Highfather allowed the congregation to vent some of its passion before bringing his hands to his side. The crowd fell dutifully quiet.

"Our God cannot be engaged in battle, let alone be defeated. He cannot be seen, though he is everywhere. He has been called many names: The Grim Reaper, the King of Terrors, the Emperor of Ice Cream, Azrael, the Angel of Death. He is Entropy and his rule is total."

"He can be found in the parched mortar between aging bricks; in the crumbling gait of an old man; in the jaundiced petal of a dying flower."

"He is at work in the cartilage of an athlete's knee and the vocal cords of a soprano's throat. His voice speaks in the grinding of gears and the ticking of a clock. He walks with the sun as it parades between horizons, and remains after hours to carouse in the dark. He is Entropy and he is our lord."

No outburst. No chants. The audience sat spell-bound by the Highfather's presence. "Only those of us with the courage to acknowledge and accept his presence will be prepared for his inevitable victory."

"For centuries, mankind has grown soft, seeking to protect itself from Entropy's angels, seeking through technology, to shield himself from the rigors of climate, labor, travel, disease. Yet still, the cause of our God has advanced until we stand at the brink of the general doom. But for us, my brothers and sisters, Doom holds no terror!" More cheers from the crowd.

"We have prepared ourselves. Abandoned modernity. Abandoned licentiousness. Abandoned corruption. We have purified ourselves in preparation for the salvation of the abyss. Brothers and Sisters, our salvation is at hand." The congregation roared and the chanting began anew with no prospect of being hushed.

“DOOM! DOOM! DOOM! DOOM!”

He circled the podium a second time, basking in their released fervor. Then, stepping back onto the elevator platform, he descended beneath the dais, the chanting growing louder as though his descent were descent were a counterweight, raising their cheers.

The crowd's roar still echoed in his ears as he stepped off the disc into a sacristy, furnished with lounges and plush chairs. He removed the Doom Mask and called for the tall, silent Apocalypse who functioned as his manservant. Sweat trickled down his cheek, watering the brush of his beard. “Some wine, Simon. My throat is parched.” Simon, anticipating the Highfather's needs, had the wine ready. The Apocalypse had attended the Highfather since his rise to power and was the only person permitted to see the priest's unmasked face. But if the mute servant understood the significance of this privilege, he kept it, and most other things, to himself.

“I have many sins, Simon,” he said after gulping half the glass of wine. “But I enjoy my vanity the most. When I assumed the role of the Highfather, I never realized how enjoyable it would be. I was only looking for a job. But those people, and thousands of others like them, hang on my words as if I were a god. Of course that is a status I can lay claim to.”

He moved to a sofa and sat down, extending one leg across the vacant pillows. When he'd assumed command of the Brother and Sisterhood five years ago, he never dreamed the position would be so satisfying. The Brother and Sisterhood had existed for nearly one hundred years, dourly warning an uninterested world that mankind's lifestyle would provoke a wrathful God to destroy the Earth. When he assumed control, he effected an important change in the direction of the liturgy, turning up the rhetorical heat, warning not of a vague, distant threat, but trumpeting the general doom. His passionate heralding of disaster enfolded the cult with new passion and converts. His oratorical success had surprised him, since he hadn't possessed any sweeping religious beliefs when he became the Highfather. He was simply making it up as he went along. But he knew that the anomalies portended disaster and perhaps the congregation, sensing his certitude, believed as well.

Lately he'd wondered about the faith he inspired in the worshipers, particularly the Apocalypses, whose faith was unquestioned. Despite what he preached, he knew the time crisis would claim their souls as ruthlessly as it would the vilest sinner. But his congregation believed him when he said they would be saved and their faith provided them a comfort and security no less sincere for it's being founded on lies.

That he might actually improve the lives of the church members was something he had never considered. As the end grew nearer, he thought

to test the limits of that faith.

“Simon, have you ever heard of the Reverend Jim Jones?” The silent Apocalypse shook his head, indicating he hadn’t. “Well. There was a man who could motivate his ministry. There is much the Brother and Sisterhood could learn from such a man.”

Chapter 6

The landscape flashed past the oval window, a series of color smears on a blurred canvas, as the bullet train raced the distance between Washington and Boston. Carl couldn't believe a three hundred mile-an-hour train ride could seem so lengthy. Neither he nor Adam had spoken since they left the White House and as their frustration festered, the train car grew increasingly claustrophobic.

The President's refusal to approve the mission devastated both of them. Adam's face twisted into an expression of fragilely contained rage. He viewed Elizabeth Grant as a mere lawyer, who had skillfully advanced along the national political career ladder — Congresswoman, Senator, Vice Presidential candidate — until finally as President she controlled an invention she couldn't understand. From the beginning of the hearings, Adam bristled at having to prostrate himself before someone he obviously saw as inferior.

As maddening as the President's refusal, the sycophantic behavior of Perry Colonsantos and James Cartney equally angered Adam. At least Bazelon had taken a firm stand and openly opposed the mission. Colonsantos' and Cartney's vague pledges of support after the President had left the hearing room and promises to lobby Grant in their favor appeared to be blatant pandering, considering their equivocation during the hearing. But Carl understood their position. What he and Adam had proposed radically departed from the norm in the scientific community. Carl didn't believe Perry and James to be duplicitous courtiers. Their support was genuine, but tempered by ethics and a professionally inbred caution.

Carl even understood the President's decision, although it still frustrated him. She faced a cosmic scaled crisis and they expected her to trust the world to a plan her own advisors didn't fully endorse. Faced with such uncertainty, Carl thought, he might have made the same decision. He wished Adam could at least appreciate the President's position, which as she explained at the hearing, would sound perfectly reasonable to anyone not aware of the immediacy of the crisis.

"It is precisely because I believe you will eventually succeed that I

am delaying your mission,” the President had said, announcing her ironic decree. “The government has invested billions of dollars in temporal research and your time sphere represents the pinnacle of our efforts. As such you are too valuable to be lost in an ill-planned premature mission.

Adam, of course, challenged her. “Ideally we would test the sphere more thoroughly. But I don’t think you understand the immediacy of the threat.”

“I fully realize the threat of the anomalies and the need to boldly combat them.” The President’s voice rose slightly, in what Carl assumed was an emotional reach for Grant. “But if the two of you represent our best hope of traveling through time, I can’t recklessly squander you. You said a mission team would have only one chance to save Kennedy if it traveled back to 1963. I want to be damn sure one chance is enough.” When the hearing ended, Adam appeared to slip into shock, barely acknowledging Colonsantos or Perry when they approached the witness table. Adam’s quiet intensity for the last two hours disturbed Carl more than the fiercest outburst would have.

For Carl, the President’s decision reinvigorated his doubts over their “mission ready” status. He had allowed an obsessed and reckless Adam to convince him they were more prepared than they actually were. As the train neared Boston, Carl resolved to objectively determine exactly what their chances for success were.

By the time they arrived at Tempus Frangit, the winter sun had set and the cold permeated their tired bodies. The fight over, even Adam couldn’t resist the fatigue besieging them. As they entered Adam’s office they felt as though they had completed a long journey. But if the journey had ended, they had arrived at two different destinations.

Not stopping to remove his coat, Carl loudly sighed and stretched himself out on the sofa. Adam removed his jacket and tossed it onto his desk before walking to a file cabinet, opening the bottom drawer and extracting a bottle of whiskey. Although he rarely drank, Adam kept the bottle to offer visiting friends, Ben Keyes in particular, and for days when the research became too damn frustrating. But Adam hadn’t touched the bottle in the two months since his press conference, having no time for guests and needing all his energy for work. Removing a glass from the drawer, Adam slowly poured. “Could you pour me one as well?” Carl asked. Adam looked up from his glass. Carl never drank, but his request didn’t seem inappropriate. Adam picked a second glass from the drawer and poured Carl a smaller amount than he had for himself. Walking over to the sofa, he handed the glass to Carl who laboriously pulled himself to a sitting position and accepted the drink.

“Be careful. If you’ve never drank it, it could put you out.”

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Carl said, nearly imperceptibly. Both men drank. Carl coughed and made a face, his eyes watering.

“We have to steal her, Carl.” Carl paused a moment before lifting his watering, disbelieving eyes at his partner. “Grant was clever not to trust me, and double the guards on the lab. They’ll make things difficult, and Ben Keyes isn’t an easy man to get around, but it’s still possible and the sphere’s essentially functioning. We could launch tomorrow if we had to.” Carl listened, slowly shaking his head. “We’re not as unprepared as the President thinks. I anticipated the possibility of her rejecting us and planned ahead.”

“What are you . . . you planned ahead? Why didn’t you tell me any of this?”

Adam walked to his desk and leaned against it, his profile facing Carl. “Since we first identified the Kennedy assassination as the nexus of the anomalies I’ve been preparing a mission to 1963, with or without the President’s approval. An associate of mine, William Stein, a Harvard historian I met a few years ago, assigned his graduate students to collect data on the major figures in the Kennedy Administration, members of his family and everyone who came into contact with the President in the week before his death. Last week I asked him to consider becoming a member of the time sphere’s crew. A contact of Bridgette’s at the Smithsonian is helping to obtain replicas of clothing native to 1963, removing the problem of what we’ll wear. But finding large quantities of twentieth-century money has proven much tougher. I figure we’ll need a few thousand dollars at least. We’ll probably have to steal it first thing when we arrive in ’63.”

“Wait. Stop.” Carl unsteadily rose to his feet, the whiskey rushing to his head. “You want to steal our invention and you don’t even pretend to consult me. What else have you planned behind my back. You’ve never listened to me. Never seriously considered my opinion, unless it was to patronize me and keep me happy. When you insisted we join Tempus Frangit, I warned you the day would come when we’d be denied our own invention. It’s over, Adam,” Carl’s hand slashed the air between he and Adam. “You committed us to their rules and now we’re going to play by them.”

“We do that and we die,” Adam shouted ferociously. “Don’t be throwing Frangit up at me. You’ve been bitter about that for years. If it hadn’t been for their money we wouldn’t be where we are. But T.F. and Grant and Bazelon — they’re obstacles now and I’ll overcome them and if you become an obstacle, I’ll overcome you. Don’t you see,” Adam stared at Carl intensely, “we’ve done something, touched forces few people even understand. But . . . someone beat us. Dammit he got there first.

But we have to be second because otherwise there will be one hell of a cosmic catastrophe.”

Adam’s shouts struck Carl like punches. He lowered himself to the sofa, exhaustion and whiskey breaking his will. “I don’t care what you do, Adam,” he said contemptuously, “I’m tired and I won’t fight anymore.” Carl slumped to his right and lapsed into sleep.

Adam studied his partner, the grimace of the previous months’ pressure and tension retreating from Carl’s face as he slept. He had finally pushed Carl Czernak too far. He had pushed the younger man since the day they had become partners, because although he needed Carl to succeed, he never considered him a decision making equal. He pushed him into a partnership, pushed him into Tempus Frangit and was now pushing him into crime.

Adam ran his finger around the rim of his glass and suppressed a shudder. His own ambition frightened him. When aroused it rushed through his veins like some virus attached to every blood cell. He could feel it make his blood hotter, his mind work faster. Everything else, people, laws, feelings, became secondary to the virus’ demands. It nearly ruined his marriage, left him lonely with few friends and ostracized, as a ruthless prima donna, from much of his professional community. But the virus kept him going. Kept him working when the results weren’t there, gave him the single minded stamina to endure the grueling hours that broke other men. And it emboldened him to defy the President of the United States. Looking at Carl’s exhausted figure slumped on the sofa, Adam was grateful for his ambition. It was the only hope time had.

Irwin Bazelon packed the tobacco into the bowl of his pipe as Bach’s Concerto for Two Violins drifted from the digi-tape player. Striking his lighter, he touched the flame to the tobacco, inhaling deeply, a rich smell of hazelnut dancing from the bowl with graceful wisps of smoke. Bazelon lowered his bulky frame into the plush throne-like desk chair in his den. Although he scorned the vice in general and never smoked in public, he allowed himself an infrequent lapse.

It had been a good day. He had confronted Adam Cooper and defeated his rival’s reckless plan, just as the Highfather had instructed. Of course Irwin would have fought Cooper without the Highfather’s urging. Adam Cooper, Irwin believed, was an arrogant upstart who needed a lesson in humility. If Adam Cooper gazed upon the time continuum, Bazelon believed, it was because he stood on the shoulders of Irwin Bazelon and others like him. When he was an active researcher, Bazelon’s assumptions predated and paralleled Cooper’s. But where Irwin failed, Adam succeeded. But Cooper’s ego wouldn’t permit him to extend any credit, acknowledge

any debt to men like Irwin, who paved the way for the time sphere, thus denying them their place in history.

Still, it unsettled Bazelon to know the Highfather desired Cooper's failure. As a member of the Brother and Sisterhood of the Abyss, Irwin believed that mankind invited doom through its venal behavior, but he didn't welcome the end. The Highfather viewed the anomalies as long-awaited harbingers of Apocalypse. Despite Bazelon's assuring him Cooper's sphere was untested and his mission would fail, the Highfather, certain Cooper would succeed, preoccupied himself with the hearings, as if he had a personal stake in the outcome. This wasn't the first time Bazelon realized how little he knew about the Highfather, and with Cooper defeated, he determined to learn more about the man beneath the Doom Mask.

But tonight, after calling the Highfather with the news of victory, he would content himself with Bach and tobacco. He activated the pictaphone and selected the pre-set key connecting him to the Highfather. Talking to the charismatic priest intimidated Bazelon, but since his news was good, he hoped the conversation would be short. The screen flickered to life and a silhouette of the Highfather's head filled the screen, only his bearded chin protruding from the shadows. Another thing bothering Bazelon: he never saw the Highfather's face, usually obscured by the ceremonial mask or hidden in shadows. "Good evening, Irwin," his powerful voice issued undiluted from the speaker. "I trust the news is good."

"It certainly is, Highfather. Due to my refutation of Cooper's and Czernak's testimony, President Grant delayed their mission until complete tests on their time machine can be conducted, which should take months. Also I convinced Grant, as per your suggestion, to assign an observer team and increase the twenty-four hour guard on the Cooper/Czernak laboratory."

The Highfather remained silent. Bazelon expected a triumphant cackle, a victorious boast, possibly even congratulations. Instead the Highfather calmly said, "A car will come for you tomorrow evening. I would like you to have dinner with me." It was a command, not an invitation. The Highfather's image, not waiting for a reply, faded from the screen.

Bazelon stared at the blank screen until the bowl of his pipe was cold. The Bach tape ended and he still stared at the screen. The triumph he celebrated a half hour ago seemed an eternity away. He felt a chill, but looking at the thermostat, saw the temperature was 74 degrees. It must be the sound of the winter winds outside his window, he thought. Nothing more.

Chapter 7

“... appreciate your interest. I realize this is a lot for you to take in at one time but I assure you, I’ll explain everything tomorrow night.”

Adam switched the picta-phone off and activated the apartment’s intercom. “Bridgette. If you’re finished with whatever your doing, I’m ready to talk.”

“O.K., Dad. I’ll be there as soon as I finish up. One second.”

As her voice filtered through the intercom he noticed her girlish tones filling out into the woman’s voice and sounding more like her mother every day. Adam glanced at the vid-screen where a salesman, standing amidst holograms of foreign cities and beaches, hawked one of the latest products of post-crisis entrepreneurship. “How should you react when your retirement plans, stock holdings and long term securities are suddenly rendered worthless by impending chronal catastrophe? Spend that nestegg by embarking on an Armagetaway— the terminal vacation. Special tours of London, Tokyo, New York, Rome, the Black Sea— first cabin all the way. Each junket tailored to exhaust the limits of your liquifiable assets. Accommodations are limited so call today to avoid missing out. Take the vacation of a lifetime, while there’s time in your life.” He switched the monitor to a different frequency.

He had been worrying about Bridgette’s reaction to the crisis for weeks. Worrying about Bridgette was nothing new. He had done that since Maggie’s death. Growing up without a mother was difficult enough, but with her only parent spending most of his time in a laboratory, she had to grow up quickly. He was proud and even a little surprised at the fine young woman that she’d become and he felt guilty that his role in her growing up was so small.

Ironically, the crisis had drawn them closer together. She accepted his explanation of the anomalies with stunningly cool stoicism. She moved back into the apartment, helped him plan the mission and made sure he ate and slept during the frantic weeks of research. He decided she was either unbelievably brave or suppressing her fear by keeping busy and constantly maintaining emotional control. It could be that after growing up

alone, she had become too self reliant and unable to ask for help. Most of all, he feared her emotional control breaking down at a critical point in the mission.

All of them — Bridgette, Carl and himself — were under absurd pressure. Staring at the abyss was one thing, but living with it outside your door for several months could break the strongest person.

Bridgette hustled through the door carrying a small stack of folders under her arm, her sandy, bobbed hair unruly, her yellow blouse hanging out around her waist. With her petite, slightly pointed nose and high rounded cheekbones, Bridgette mirrored her mother's features and was a kind of looking glass into the past for Adam. She was a sweet, young woman, but with a sharp wit and capacity for cool analysis. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Dad. I'm collecting all our holos onto a master. I know that sounds frivolous at a time like this, but I think it's important to save some things."

"No need to apologize, Bridgy. I agree we should preserve some of our memories. How did you make out?"

"I've managed to fit our whole collection onto two disks. Of course I had to reduce it all to a numeric code but I should be able to recompile it when we get back. That is, if getting back means anything at this point."

"Things are beginning to fall into place," he indicated the pictaphone. "I just spoke with the Steel woman, she'll be here with the others tomorrow night."

"So we've got ourselves a mercenary," she said, dumping the folders onto Adam's desktop. "While I was recording, I looked through these files you took from Frangit — some nasty characters our government hires. I'm not surprised you picked Steel, though." Bridgette picked a folder from the stack and flipped through it. "Her credentials are impressive: eight years in the field, extended duty in Brazil, proficiency in light and heavy ordnance, and from reading her psychological profile, I'd say she has a definite mean streak."

"She hasn't agreed to join us yet, only to come to the meeting tomorrow night and listen to what we have to say."

"Don't worry. I can't imagine anyone refusing you when you push hard enough. But that's something I want to talk about before we deal with the Smithsonian trip. I think you're making a mistake with this crew of yours, surrounding yourself with old cronies when the whole world's at stake."

"Bridgy, we've already argued this. I told you I need people I can trust."

"Ben Keyes is someone you can trust and he's a professional who handles these kinds of missions for a living."

"Honey, Ben's a good man and I wish we could take him, but he

serves the government blindly. They ruined his career and he's still loyal." He shook his head. "No if I told Ben I'm going to steal the sphere, I'd never get near Frangit again. In fact he'd probably have me arrested. Don't worry, I appreciate the need for muscle, that's why I'm hiring Steel."

"I hope she's enough, because outside of Steel we don't have much muscle. I mean William Stein is sixty-four, Dad. Is he going to have the stamina to run around the twentieth century for a week?"

"This mission is going to require knowledge and strategy more than brute force. Stein knows the period."

"I know the period."

Adam shrugged his head in weary frustration at his daughter's stubbornness. "Dear, you're a fine young scholar . . ."

"Don't patronize me Dad."

"But your BA in history doesn't compare to William Stein's lifetime of study. He's familiar with the customs and socio-political structures of the twentieth century and he's related to the Kennedys and that's why he's going."

"Then why bother taking me along?" Her voice rose. She was getting angrier. "I thought you needed me; I didn't know you were just protecting your little girl."

"Bridgy," he pleaded, hoping to avoid a protracted conflict, "I do need you. I couldn't have lived through these last few months without your support. You're the only person I absolutely know I can rely on, so you have to believe me when I say you're an important part of this team. But at the same time, I'd take you with me even if you were completely useless to me. I can barely come to terms with your mother's death. I couldn't stand losing you as well."

Her father's compassion and his invocation of her mother caused Bridgette's control to momentarily waver, her eyes rounded in pain. But only for a moment. She bit her lower lip and shook her head from side to side as if shooing a fly. "Are you bringing your old college buddy along for the same reason?"

Adam's concern over Bridgette appeared well-grounded. She was emotionally strung out. "Alex is my friend, but I'm not taking him because I want to protect him. He's the type of person we need on this mission. He knows how to talk to people, government people, and he's familiar with operating in a bureaucracy. The fact that he's my friend makes him someone I can trust almost as much as I trust you."

She sat on the corner of her father's desk. "He's going to be thrilled with the early sixties' enlightened racial views. You know they still called blacks 'Negroes' in their newspapers."

Adam almost smiled. "You have to be satisfied with these people, honey. We're going to break the law — criminals can't be very choosy

in picking their friends.”

“You’ve always known what you’re doing. I’ll assume your judgment’s still sound,” she said, not completely convinced. She placed the Iris Steel file on the stack of folders. “Let’s talk about my favorite new fashion store — the Smithsonian Institute.”

With its shaded, deep green, squirrel-populated lawns, the National Mall, housing the Smithsonian Institute, remained one of the few federal facilities in Washington D.C. to resist the phenomenon of creeping Pentagonization — the consolidating of whole bureaucracies under one roof, which had transformed the Capital City into a collection of block long concrete monoliths. Pentagonization was never a conscious policy. The process began in 2068 with the construction of the Congressional Pavilion which collected the several House and Senate office buildings and the four Library of Congress annexes into one building dominating the area behind the Capitol. A series of underground tunnels already connected the buildings, so putting them all under one roof didn’t appear a radical suggestion. The original Library maintained its integrity, only because its unique design couldn’t be skillfully incorporated into the Pavillon’s smooth, sloping concrete walls.

And the White House’s gradual move underground seemed a logical solution to an office space problem caused by a burgeoning executive branch outstripping the available office space. With Secretaries and Under-Secretaries and Assistants to Under-Secretaries all fighting for office space as near to the Oval Office as possible, government planners developed the only real estate available, that below the White House. During the Pan American War, the President and the highest elements of the executive branch moved into the fifteen story subterranean complex, leaving the aging White House to serve ceremonial roles — serving as a greeting hall for visiting dignitaries and as a banquet hall, staging press conferences and photo sessions with the President in the vacated Oval Office — and as a guest house for foreign heads of state. The President and First Spouse now lived in an underground condominium, with access to an above-ground garden. In fact, with the hundreds of tourists who continued to visit the old mansion, it was more a museum than seat of government.

As they walked east along Madison Avenue, through the mall, Adam, Bridgette and Carl eyed the Capitol dome a few miles distant, surrounded by workers on null-grav scaffolds. The dome was undergoing its third refurbishing, including structural as well as cosmetic improvements. The capital project was the latest in the Tricentennial Reconstruction Program launched two years before the nation’s three hundredth birthday in 2076 and prompted by the collapse of the east portico of the White House dur-

ing President Santel's second inaugural in 2072. At the time of the disaster, several unsentimental Congressmen opined that perhaps the time had come to "rip the old fire trap down." Fortunately, the majority of the Congress, recognizing the historical continuity and political legitimacy conferred by the original building, voted to structurally reinforce the President's home, making it, according to D.C. Mayor Christopher Bates, "durable enough to stand in perpetuity or at least until it's someone else's problem."

In the last eleven years the Tricentennial Committee sponsored dozens of projects, varying in scale, designed to spruce up government buildings and monuments. Unfortunately not all the historic buildings could be saved, notably, the Smithsonian Castle, which the Department of Interior demolished in 2082 after a fire had gutted the Institute's first home. As they walked past the construction site of the new castle being erected on the site of the old, Bridgette voiced her disapproval. "It won't be the same. I've read about it. Its architecture is supposed to mimic the original while incorporating neo-Johnsonian motifs. Kind of an attempt to blend the past and present. But it just won't have that sense of history the old castle had. I spent a lot of time there when I was here on the Wilson scholarship. It was dilapidated. Antique plumbing, inadequate climate control. But it had such charisma."

As Bridgette spoke, they arrived at the Museum of American History and climbed the stairs to the main entrance, where tourists were filing out of the building. The crowd in the lobby, however, was sparse. "I used to get so excited about coming here," Bridgette said, "but now, knowing so much of the history displayed here is bogus," she shook her head, "it makes me angry."

"Only the post-63 artifacts are dubious." Carl attempted to be positive.

"But that's a whole century, Carl. Two summers ago I visited this huge 1970's exhibit in the Arts and Industries Building. It was incredible, recreating the look and feel of a whole decade: neon lights, early shopping malls, discos, polyester, football. With only a little effort, I could imagine life over a hundred years ago. But that's all meaningless now."

Passing through the only turnstiles still admitting visitors, the three of them entered the lobby where a squat three and a half foot tall, silver drone, floating above the crowd, repeated in a sexless voice from the unseen speaker in the vid-screen serving as its head: "The museum is closing in twenty-eight minutes. The Smithsonian Institute hopes you've enjoyed your visit to the Museum of American History and invites you to return soon."

"This way," Adam motioned Bridgette and Carl to their left and the east wing of the museum. "Hezekiah told me he'd meet us on the second

floor, near the Roaring Twenties exhibit.”

“The twenties,” Bridgette exclaimed, “we know that decade existed. Gin joints, flappers, gangsters, the Yankees, talkies. That was a generation with style. ’Course they didn’t have a very happy ending.” The elevators lifted them to the second floor where a rounder, sleeker drone floated in the hall. “. . . hope you’ve enjoyed your stay . . .” Cooper watched the drone from the corner of his eye as they passed. It wouldn’t activate its aggressive mode until the museum had closed. Adam planned on their being off the exhibit floor by then. They entered the twenties exhibit where holograms of flappers danced the Charlestown to recorded jazz. Monitors televised film footage of baseball games and President Coolidge wearing an Indian head dress. Displays showcased period furniture, fashions and original manuscripts by Fitzgerald and Hemingway. Bridgette involuntarily passed through the exhibit, engrossed in the anachrony, despite the serious nature of her visit.

Adam glanced around nervously. There was no sign of Hezeckiah Bisteneau, the assistant curator who had promised to procure twentieth century clothing for the time travelers to wear in 1963. “Damn, he isn’t here. I knew it was a mistake to rely on him,” he said to Bridgette, who chafed at her father’s blaming Hezeckiah’s tardiness on her. True, she had suggested coming to him for the clothes, but they hadn’t much choice. He was the only person they knew with access to such a large historical wardrobe. Still she shared her father’s concern. Hezeckiah was a good man. She really believed that. But his irresponsibility and self-destructive tendencies regularly tested the faith of those who believed in him. Bridgette met him, a handsome, unctuously courteous charmer from New Orleans, who wore brightly-colored, tailored suits, during the summer she interned at the Woodrow Wilson Institute. As an assistant curator of the American History Museum, he had administered her program, although his administration was inattentive at best, as he infrequently appeared for the intern review sessions and charted no real direction for their research. He was an enigma. Although not a powerful intellect, he was an enthusiastic historian and an occasionally dedicated curator. He could be nearly brilliant when he wanted to be. But his fondness for liquor and reputation as a womanizer consistently undermined his career. Bridgette tried not to judge Hezeckiah harshly, giving him the benefit of every doubt, but sometimes it was hard to forgive the hard-living dandy his excesses.

They nervously paced through the exhibit, even Bridgette ignoring the displays, as closing time neared and the security drone cruised the hallway.

Two minutes passed. Then another five minutes.

The dancing holograms abruptly faded and the display lights dimmed. Adam swore again. A drone curved in from the hall and circled the ex-

hibit room before coming to a stop behind the three intruders and opposite the door through which it had just come. "The museum closes in four minutes. Please proceed to the nearest exit. We hope you've enjoyed your visit." A small black lens-tipped cylinder extended from the round body of the drone. "We're being scanned," Carl observed. In forty-five seconds the drone recorded the images, heart and respiratory rates of the three of them and entered the information into the drones' communal data pool from where the other robots could access it.

"We're going to have to abort," Adam muttered through clenched teeth.

The drone hovered mutely.

"What's it going to do, Dad?"

"Wait until the museum closes and if we're still standing here, treat us as trespassers."

"And if it decides we're trespassers?" Bridgette asked.

"Then all the drones in the museum will use high frequency sound blasters to render us unconscious and then notify the police to come and arrest us."

"Oh."

"We need to make a decision, Adam." Carl stated the obvious.

Adam was livid. "Let's get out of here," he growled and broke for the door, with Carl and Bridgette behind him, only to have their exit cut off by three black drones swooping through the hall towards them. The drone behind them spoke and, although drones had only one vocal tone, it sounded more hostile.

"You are trespassing on government property. Arrange yourselves in a single file line and allow yourselves to be escorted to the security station. Do not attempt to flee or resist arrest or you shall be incapacitated." They were trapped. The square torsos of the drones began ominously humming as their sound blasters began charging. "Intruders scanned and matched to existing structures in data base. Intruders resisting arrest commands. Lock systems to intruders and prepare to fire." Adam, Bridgette and Carl desperately searched for an exit or some weapon. Failing that, they braced for the high volume impact of the sound blaster, when suddenly the humming faded and the monitor-faces dimmed to black.

Adam, Bridgette and Carl exchanged glances, still tense, not trusting the apparently lifeless drones. Footsteps shuffled down the hallway from where a thick southern accent sounded. "Ya' all right now. I cut these little tyrants off from their pow'r source." Hezekiah Bisteneau rounded the corner. He was blond haired, standing a few inches over six foot and wearing a red suit with a red string tie sloppily hanging from the collar of his white shirt.

"Hezekiah," Bridgette exclaimed. "Thank God you came."

“If you’d shown up on time we wouldn’t have needed rescuing.” Adam looked as though he’d swing a punch at their rescuer.

“Ah apologize for those damn drones. About ev’ry otha week, some poor tourist lingers a few minutes past four-thirty and finds himself arrested. The problem is they keep replacin’ people with machines and it just cain’t work. Anyhow,” he flipped a remote unit in the air with his left hand, “ah used this device here ta save ya. One a’ the advantages a’ bein’ an assistant curator. Allows for a measure of human control.” He turned to Bridgette as if he’d just noticed her. “My, Miss Cooper. Ya’ all are as lovely as ya were two years ago.” He bowed his head slightly and ran his vision the length of her body, causing her to squirm. She forced a smile, but his flattery wasn’t as charming as she’d remembered. None of him was. He smelled of gin and the red suit must have been years old, the color fading at the seams of the pockets and along the pant legs, the ends of which bunched around the tops of his shoes. The very beginnings of a belly appeared above his belt, worn too low on his hips. The lines on his full, whisker stubbled face betrayed the hazardous routines of his lifestyle. He was not the handsome, indestructible rake of two summers ago.

“You’re drunk,” Adam attacked. “Don’t you understand how important this is?”

“Get one thing certain, Cooper.” Hezekiah’s eyes blazed with anger. “Ah don’t owe ya my assistance. Ah understand perfectly what is at stake here. It don’ make a bit a’ difference ta’ me personally if ya all go back in time naked or if ya’ don’ go at all. Ah don’ work for ya and I don’ take orders from ya. So when Ah drank is my own business.” Adam and he stared at one other. Adam checked his anger and let it slowly drain. He couldn’t risk losing Hezekiah’s help. Calming down, Hezekiah turned from Adam. “Now then, let us proceed to the fittin’.”

Hezekiah led them to an office suite located behind a private doorway in the rear of a display of nineteenth-century American glassware, the disheveled curator indicating as they walked, the highlights of various displays and deactivating two more drones.

Hezekiah’s office was a museum in its own right, a small shrine to nineteenth-century Americana. The weapons of the old west: a pair of Colt .45 pistols, a Sharpe’s buffalo rifle and a Bowie knife, hung on the wall over a nearly bare, but still sloppy desk upon which sat a half-dozen two hundred year old bottles. Posters of the Hayes-Tilden presidential election, the closest in American history, hung on the walls. A sofa and lounge chair were shoved against a wall to make room for a dressing curtain and two racks of clothing in the center of the room, which Hezekiah indicated with a sweep of his arm. “As per ahr agreement, the very finest the Smithsonian has ta offer in twentieth century clothin’.” He

slumped into his creaking desk chair, throwing his white boots onto the desk top.

Adam handed Bridgette a slip of paper. "These are Iris Steel's sizes. See if you can find her something. Carl and I will select a few things for Alex and Stein." They flipped through the hangers draped with suits, slacks, dresses, button down shirts and narrow black ties. Carl tried one of the white shirts on, but noticing the yellow pallor of age had ruined it, rejected it. They decided at that point, to choose as dark colors as possible. Adam held up a matted, tweed sport coat, with the patches on its elbows peeling off. "Some of these clothes are in pretty bad shape, Bisteneau. Is this the best you could do?"

"Most a' those clothes are replicas which we use in displays, but among those ahr actual garments from the mid-twentieth century. All things considered, ah didn't think it mattered if we used the real thing." Hezekiah drew a long gulp from a flask of gin he'd pulled from his jacket pocket.

"No hats, Dad," Bridgette cautioned her father who was carefully positioning a fedora on his head. "Hat's were out of vogue in '63." Adam removed the hat, slightly disappointed he couldn't wear it. "Blame it on JFK. He never wore them because they messed up his hair."

"Ya know Cooper," Hezekiah said, still holding the flask in his right hand. "Ah was thinkin', if ya need a historian familiar with the period, Ah could be persuaded ta' join up with ya."

"Forget it, Hezekiah." Adam, tugging on a pair of pants, cut him short. "The crew's set."

"Surely ya' all got room for one more man. Ya' can always use more help. And after all the trouble Ah went through to get these clothes. Riskin' muh career . . ."

"No. Hezekiah, I'm sorry, but the answer's no." Adam's rebuke was unmistakably final.

Hezekiah seemed to shrink in his chair as he took another drink from his flask. "Yeah," he slurred, "it usually is."

"Is it safe for me to come out?" Bridgette called from behind the divider. Assured everyone was dressed, Bridgette stepped into the open, wearing a light blue sweater and a knee length white skirt. She'd pulled her hair behind her ears, anchoring it with two square, yellow plastic barrettes. "How do I look?"

"Just like an anomaly Bridgy. How about me?" he asked, straightening himself to give her a good view of the double-breasted blue suit and tan overcoat he'd selected.

"Great, Dad. Just like Bogart."

Carl, wearing a brown wool sweater, stepped from around the rack, his arms full of clothes. "I've selected a few things for the others and

some additional clothing for myself.”

“Good. I’ve got everything I need. Bridgette, how’d you make out?”

“I’m set, I suppose. I had to pick out the most androgynous male clothes I could find for Iris Steel. There just isn’t anything here that would fit a six-foot woman.”

“Six-foot?” Hezeckiah boomed. “If ya’ cain’t take me with ya’, ya can at least introduce me ta this Amazon a’ yours.”

They changed back to their street clothes, packed the twentieth-century garments into suitcases provided by Hezeckiah and left through a private, employees’ exit, with Hezeckiah, in a strained effort to maintain his panache, vainly bargaining for Iris Steel’s picta-phone number.

As they rode the bullet train to Boston, Iris couldn’t get Hezeckiah out of her mind. “I felt so sorry for him. He knows what’s going to happen and he’s so afraid. We could have taken him back, Dad. We could probably fit another person. And he is qualified.”

Adam remained firm in his decision. “No, honey. The more people in the crew, the more difficult the shift. Besides, you can’t trust a man like Hezeckiah. They have no sense of proportion in their lives. No sense of what’s important. They rely on people like us to constantly undo their mistakes. We don’t need that kind of person endangering our mission.”

Chapter 8

The turbo lift carried Alex and the obese couple toward the 53rd floor of building #4 of the 10th Avenue Housing Complex in the Chelsea section of Manhattan. Part of a massive housing project built in 2063, the monolithic aluminum-and-steel facaded giant housed 11,000 people in single and family units providing “modern, sanitary, private living quarters” according to the real estate brochure. “More like sterile, cramped and isolated,” thought Alex. He leaned against the back wall of the lift as the fat couple, alternately wheezed labored breaths and talked about the Magno-Ball game they had seen the night before.

The elevator swooshed open at the 53rd floor and Alex shouldered between the fat couple and turned left down the brown hallway lined with gray aluminum doors set equidistantly apart. When he arrived at the door marked “Blue”, he placed his eye before the retinal scanner. The scanner beeped, the lock clicked and the hydraulic hinges hissed open. He passed through the narrow foyer, leaving his coat in the hall closet, and headed for the kitchen where Patty’s plump figure stood at the counter preparing steaks for the food processor.

“How was work?” she asked without turning around.

“Same grind,” he answered, reaching into the cryo-cabinet for a beer.

“I heard from Jimmy today.”

“What did he have to say?”

“Oh he’s worried about exams again. He worries himself sick about his tests and then he always does well. I wish he’d enjoy himself a little more. A young man shouldn’t spend all his time studying. He should find a girlfriend, enjoy himself instead of worrying about being a doctor all the time.”

“It’s the boy’s dream, Pat. Don’t worry about James; he knows what he’s doing.” Alex sat at the kitchen table and turned his attention to the small vid-screen mounted above the kitchen counter. An interviewer was talking to a panel of successful limb transplant patients.

“So your wife and you have adjusted to your new limbs?”

“Absolutely Pat. Quite frankly I haven’t felt this healthy in years.”

“Yes, Brad’s a much different man.”

“That’s wonderful, just wonderful. To be able to adapt so well to another person’s body parts. It’s an emotional triumph for all of us. Let’s hear from you at home. Have a question for our panel? Feel free to beam on in.”

Alex shook his head, “I don’t think I’d like having someone else’s body parts.”

“Who’s to say? In some cases it might be an improvement.”

He watched as the viewers called in, their images transmitted from their homes and integrated with the network signal, allowing the caller’s face to appear side by side with the limb recipients. “Excuse me Mr. Roberts but I’m using the zoom feature on my vid-screen and I see the hairs on your left arm are lighter than the hairs on your right arm.”

“Yes, the donor arm on my left was taken from a Swede who broke his neck in a skiing accident. I had to dye the follicles black to match the rest of the hair on my body. The color difference is unnoticeable to the naked eye.”

“You’re right. That’s wonderful. I can barely tell the difference. Wonderful. Next viewer, please. We gotta keep moving.”

“Uh yeah . . . Ah, Am I on? . . . Oh, O.K. Uh, I have a question for Miss Kelawitz. Do you, uh, you know, feel any discomfort where the uh limb, ah affixes to the rest of you?”

“Well it took some getting used to at first. I’d get up in the morning and it would itch and be sore. But now as the cells have gradually integrated I feel fine. Of course sometimes when it’s damp outside, the leg gets extremely uncomfortable.”

Alex shook his head in disdain at the panel’s tasteless public display of their personal lives and reached for a copy of the latest *New Yorker* magazine and began paging through it.

“I talked to Sarah McFeely today. Her son’s getting married this weekend and they’re having an *AWFUL* time of it. The poor bride. The bridesmaid’s dresses, which she ordered in September, still haven’t come in. The poor thing’s in a *PANIC*. Sarah went to see the seamstress a week ago and the lady *PROMISED* she’d have the dresses today, but today’s here and no dresses. So Sarah goes back to the seamstress, which is over somewhere on Norfolk, and the lady *PROMISED* to have the dresses by Friday even if she had to bullet to Chicago and run the machines herself. But I ask you, what’s her promise worth now?” Patty placed the steaks into the processor and sat opposite her husband. “Well Sarah *COMPLETELY* lost her temper. They went into the back room and argued for forty minutes. Sarah threatened to call the police, threatened to sue her. It’s just a mess. And it’s not like it’s a small wedding either; she has

EIGHT bridesmaids. Planning a big wedding is hard enough. She doesn't need these extra problems."

"Yeah that would be tough," Alex said not glancing from the magazine, his hand absently squeezing the empty beer can. Through his years of marriage and diplomacy he learned to keep a conversation moving without participating.

"I hope it works out for her. Even if the dresses get here by Friday, they might need alterations and *THOSE* have to be done by hand." She shook her head. "When Diane or Lizzie gets married I'd just as soon see them elope. Big weddings are *TOO* much of a headache. And they cost so much anymore. Till you hire the caterer, buy a music program, have the dresses and tuxes synthesized. No. It's too much."

"You'd insist on the girls having a big wedding, Pat." Alex briefly glanced from his magazine.

"Yeah . . . I suppose you only do it once or twice so you might as well do it big. You just hope *DISASTERS* like this don't hit you. Well I know Sarah's telling everyone she knows about this seamstress. 'Weddings 'R' Us' I think her shop's called. Its not the first time someone's had a problem with this lady. Cindy Schuerpruds has a sister-in-law whose daughter had the *SAME* problem: didn't get the dresses until the week of the wedding and *THEN* they had to be altered. And Sarah says she knows her dresses will have to be altered. The maid of honor is small chested and they'll have to stitch pads into her gown and one of the girls in the party measures out on the Rul-Her at five-seven even though she insists she's five-six. I mean she said 'I've been five-six all my life. I don't understand how it could measure me at five-seven' but the seamstress wouldn't hear it. Says the machine never makes a mistake. So her gown will almost *SURELY* need taking up."

Alex watched his wife's mouth. God it moved fast. Up and down, in and out, rapidly enunciating as if it functioned separately from the rest of her still attractive but stolid face. Alex found Patty's face the most depressing thing about her. The way the flickering glow of the teenager haunted the features of the forty-eight year old mother of three, the well-formed bones weighted down by fallen cheeks. Her flirty eyes, once beguiling on the girl, seemed vaguely indecent on the middle aged woman.

"Think I'll watch the interactivision while those steaks are cooking," Alex said rising and walking to the living room.

In the living room he scanned his extensive vid and holo tape collection, which included an impressive set of classic movies from the twentieth century, bought from the Anachro-Films video club. Chaplin, Garbo, Bogart, Dean, Monroe, DeNiro — the twentieth century's timeless legacy.

But he wouldn't have time for a movie now, so he shifted his atten-

tion to the Three Dimensional History of the United States holo-tape series. The 1960's again. He had watched that tape frequently since Adam's press conference.

Slipping the disk into the interactivision, he switched the unit to "holo" and sat in his chair. The decade projected about his living room as the holo images of Camelot played out the familiar tragedy of the early sixties. At the center of the drama, the young Kennedy, hair blowing in the wind, cool breath smoking from his lips, hand slashing the air:

"Ask not what you"

"We must pay any price"

"Berliner-nach-kommen . . . Let-them-come-to-Berlin!"

". . . in the final analysis . . . we all inhabit this small planet."

And then the abrupt, terrible ending.

"Shots were fired near the President's motorcade in Dallas. . ."

From there the decade's events pile up, growing more frantic and dramatic. The people, passing before his eyes but never staying.

"I have a dream today . . ."

"I shall not seek, nor shall I accept . . ."

"I think we can heal the divisions in this country . . ."

"Like all men, I would like a long life . . . but its all right. I don't mind."

"Grab the gun Rafer . . . Grab his hand and break it if you have to."

He flipped the viewer off and the figures disappeared, leaving him once again drained by the passion with which the decade unraveled. Historians often say the United States suffered a nervous breakdown in the 1960's. But Alex was never comfortable with this analogy. It granted events a life of their own and implicitly absolved the human participants from responsibility for the tumult. Of course, if Adam Cooper is right, no one need feel guilt or responsibility for any of the recent past. King, Bobby, LBJ, Chicago, Vietnam, Watergate, the nuking of Soa Paolo—the tragedy and treachery of American life in the last 127 years—all anomalies? The product of a diseased cosmos? It would be relieving to think so, thought Alex. But no. If not these events then there would have been others. Mankind could not be separated from culpability for its fate.

Alex twirled his secretary Carol across the ballroom sized floor of his office as the bittersweet melodies of the Benny Goodman Orchestra romanced the warm night breeze drifting through the open window.

"You look so dashing in a tuxedo, Mr. Blue. And I never knew

you could dance like this.”

“Call me Alex, my dear.” He dipped Carol to his right, her blonde hair dangling above the dance floor, then brought her up hard against him. “We’ve been working together for six years, denying we felt anything for one another. But the denying ends tonight.” They stared deep into one another’s eyes. He bent towards her, her lips slightly parting. . .

“Right! What’s this, then?” A bright spot-light froze the couple in its glare. Alex squinted through the light towards his desk where a tall caricature of Jonathan Mogastu, with an outrageously angular face and shoulders, stood dressed in a doctor’s smock. The light beamed from a solar cell mounted to a surgeon’s light he wore around his head. “This is hardly acceptable behavior.” His voice was sing-songy but sinister. “*YOU’RE* a diplomat and diplomats don’t dance. Unless of course they’re told to.” Alex tried to speak but was too confused.

Where was Carol? She’d disappeared.

“Don’t try to excuse yourself now. It’s too late for that. You’ve *GOT* to have this problem treated.”

Mogastu walked to the front of his desk. “*NURSES!*” he bellowed.

Two six foot tall nurses in cripplingly steep heels and fishnet stockings entered, carrying oversized syringes equipped with four-inch needles.

“Mr. Blue isn’t feeling well and needs your special care. And ladies, *DON’T* be gentle.”

The nurses seized Alex’s shoulders and shoved him to the floor. Pinning his arms between the heel and toe of their shoes, the nurses jabbed the needles into his lower back. The cartoon character Mogastu glowered over the nurses shoulders, monitoring their work. “That’s it, ladies. Sink those needles into the adrenal cortex. Mr. Blue has too much nervous energy to work for me. Stop struggling, Alex. We’re only siphoning off your excess hormones. Depleting your ATP buildup. You’ll be so relaxed, you’ll never miss the stuff.”

The extraction finished, the nurses tossed the blood filled syringes over their shoulders, shattering them against the wall, the scarlet liquid running to the floor. Mogastu opened a case containing fresh syringes and injection cartridges and extended them to the women. “Now for the narcotics.” The nurses injected the new needles into Alex’s arm. “Twenty cc’s Lobotochrome, ten cc’s Barbitutol to make your mind right.”

The nurses stepped away from Alex and stood to either side of Mogastu who slipped his hands onto their bottoms. Blue’s head buzzed and a dull sleepy warmth embraced him as he slouched to his feet.

“Yeeess. *NOW* you’re beginning to look like a diplomat. But since your case was so advanced, we’re going to have to take steps to prevent a relapse.”

The door burst open and three dim-looking lab assistants, one with a bowl haircut, the other with a ring of unruly red hair and the third bald, fat and ceaselessly whooping, wheeled an ominous tube and hose-laden machine into the room. Positioning the device between Mogastu and Alex, the three assistants backed a few feet across the room where the man with the bad haircut stuck his fingers in the fat guy's nostrils and struck him on the head with a hammer.

Mogastu stretched a cord with a five-inch-diameter, three pronged plug attached, from the machine. "This will monitor your continued good health, Alex old buddy." Mogastu shoved Alex's head forwards and inserted the plug into the base of his skull. "This'll control your epinephrine and adrenal outputs. Keep your medulla in line and avoid anymore of this silliness. May hurt a tad at first, but after a while you'll be so numb you won't feel a thing."

"Alex! Alex!" He jolted awake. "Alex, answer that." Patty was shaking him. Breathing heavily, his heart racing, he tried to regain his bearings. He was home. In bed. The picta-phone was buzzing. "Answer it," she kicked him under the covers. He leaned from his bed and clicked on the picta-phone.

Adam Cooper appeared. "I'm sorry to wake you Alex, but I need your help."

Chapter 9

Every lunch hour for the last twenty years, the Victory Diner on Broadway, in the heart of the Manhattan financial district, is filled with a dedicated Wall Street clientele. Brokers and bankers, secretaries and clerks jam the counter, running the length of the restaurant, and the row of booths extending along a picture window parallel to the counter, all seeking to escape the pressures of the financial world, but invariably discussing business. The word on Wall Street was that more deals occurred over roast beef at the Victory than in the offices of the brokerage houses.

On a sunny but cold January day, as another lunch hour slipped away, the Wall Street crowd had returned to their offices, ceding the booths and counter to customers with time to eat leisurely. As the glass doors swung open and the warrior entered the diner, the customers broke from their conversations and glanced away from sandwiches to mark her entrance.

Although dressed as a tourist, wearing a transparent thermo-jacket over a sleeveless travel vest and a pack strapped to her back, the warrior at 5'10" 138 pounds naturally drew attention as she strode to the rear of the cafe with an athletic ease of movement. Her tight denim pants covered thick, powerful legs; the transparent jacket exposed a lean torso and long gracefully muscled arms. With a striking angular face, grey eyes and untamed black hair, she was attractive and intimidating. Despite her attempt at disguise, she exuded the confident arrogance of a killer.

Removing the backpack, Iris Steel slid into a booth along the rear wall of the diner, placing the pack beside her and unfastening its flaps. The pack contained a lightweight plastic Uzi 2000 automatic, laser-sighted sub-machine gun, the latest in personal assault rifles — lightweight, infallibly accurate and compatible with a variety of cartridges ranging from tranquilizer darts to armor piercing shells. Iris had loaded it with standard military issue shells and carried extra ammo clips and an array of daggers and hand-held weapons. She didn't like not having the weapons concealed on her body, but the tourist disguise afforded few hiding places. Fortunately, she didn't expect much trouble and accepted the risk of totting the weapons in the pack.

Scanning the diner, she encountered a hard stare from the short order cook, dressed in a white shirt and white pants standing at the grill. She didn't recognize him. Was he working for the Chinese? Had he made her as an operative? She would have to watch him carefully. A few of the booths were populated and a half dozen people sat at the counter — two businesswomen near the door, an elderly black man down from them and a husband and wife flanking their child, near the end of the counter, the child still bundled in a parka, the hood pulled tight about his head.

Iris shifted her attention to an oriental man in a business suit, facing her from the far side of a booth midway along the picture window overlooking a wide alley. As she surveyed the man, a waitress dressed in a tight fitting pastel pink uniform welcomed Iris to the Victory Diner and, indicating the menu console attached to the wall, invited her to order. Staring past the waitress, at the oriental man, Iris quickly ordered a hamburger and soft drink. As the waitress delivered the order over the counter, the cook flashed a second protracted glance at Iris. An American businessman emerged from Broadway and slid into the booth seat opposite the oriental man.

Iris disliked the choice of the diner as a rendezvous point. The tall backs of the booths blocked her view of the American, allowing her to see only three quarters of his head and torso. But the company preferred a public place, where it was less likely the Chinese could double cross them. The oriental man smiled, nodded his head in greeting, placed a briefcase on the table and began speaking. He paused irritably as the waitress approached to take his order.

Iris also disliked bodyguarding the American as he sold out his country. She had lost her idealistic patriotism and sense of innate American virtue during the Pan American war, but it angered her to watch the men from Intra-Corp sell their loyalty with so little compunction. Loyalty, she learned in combat, whether to an institution or another person was a precious and rare commodity.

The American worked for Intra-Corp Technologies, a massive defense contractor and electrical engineering multinational corporation. U.S. law forbade Intra-Corp from contracting with foreign governments for the export of high technology, because of the potential military applications of most of the company's products. But black marketeers consistently evaded the law, buying Intra-Corp technology through false front companies and reselling the items via a global network of illegal merchants and smugglers. While the truly cutting edge breakthroughs remained top secret, so much mid-level, semi-classified but still restricted technology reached foreign hands, that the Intra-Corp Board of Directors decided the company should benefit from the piracy if they couldn't eliminate it. Accordingly, the company established a covert department which peddled

semi-classified, restricted technology to foreign interests. The company pirated from itself. The American in the booth was selling a third generation hologram chip, essential to military communication and rich with espionage applications, to the Chinese Ministry of Hybrid Technologies.

Iris was to bodyguard the transaction against third party interference, particularly by the U.S. government. She had chaperoned dozens of these transactions and they usually occurred without mishap. But she was valued insurance for the company because of her familiarity with the global intelligence community and her formidable combat skills, honed by years of service in the U.S. Army Special Forces and as a freelance mercenary.

The path of Iris' life had led her from the isolated simplicity of Butte, Montana to the far-flung world of international espionage. Abandoned as a baby on the steps of a government orphanage, with a note identifying her only as Iris, and spending much of her childhood moving from orphanage to orphanage, Iris could not have imagined the violent life she would lead. She remained Iris Doe until she was nine and the Orphan's Bureau finally placed her, with a young farm couple in Butte, Montana Alan and Patricia Steel. Life in Butte was hardly eventful, but for Iris the joy of belonging to a family caused her to love the small farming community. For eight years she enjoyed the life of a western farm girl, loving her new family, attending school and forming friendships with children who wouldn't suddenly be relocated to another state facility. She was tall for her age and always athletic, excelling on the girls' basketball team and in track and field events. But as she would discover through much of her life, nothing remains stable or permanent. When she was seventeen, a fire leveled the Steel farmhouse as the family slept. Iris woke choking on smoke and rushed to her parent's bedroom to alert them of the fire. But the flames blocked her entrance to the room and although she screamed to wake them, they just laid under the covers, huddled next to one another, oblivious to the thick smoke, nearly obscuring them, and the flames burning in the doorway. Iris couldn't remember leaving the house, but somehow she had forced herself out to the front lawn where fire fighters found her unconscious. She woke in a hospital the next day and was told her mother and father had perished in the fire, victims of the smoke. Their deaths, she was assured, were painless.

She was alone again.

During her second day in the hospital, a state counselor visited her and said that since she was under eighteen, she would once again become a ward of the state. Iris vowed she would never return to the orphanage and that night she slipped out of the hospital and set out on her own. With no money, home or skills, she made the only decision she could and joined the U.S Army.

Initially she viewed the Army with the suspicion for institutions she

had developed in the orphanages, but she was desperate, knowing she joined the Army for reasons that men, hundreds of years ago, joined the Foreign Legion — she had nowhere else to go. But she soon felt comfortable in the military. If the military didn't love her as the Steels had, it at least needed and appreciated her. And unlike the orphanage, this institution, with its uniforms, sense of duty and honor and camaraderie among the soldiers, instilled loyalty and a sense of belonging.

Anxious to be a good soldier, to prove she belonged in the service, she excelled in boot camp, her natural athletic gifts enabling her to climb to the top of her training class. After basic, her drill sergeant recommended her as a singularly qualified candidate for the Army Special Forces, where she would train in urban warfare, weaponry and hand-to-hand combat. When the Pan American War erupted in 2079, the Special Forces formed the vanguard of the American war effort. Decorated for bravery and valor, Iris saw extensive action, including covert operations during the sieges of Mexico City and Brasilia.

When the war ended in 2082, with the nuclear bombing of Sao Paulo, the role of the American military in South America changed from invader to occupier, responsible for putting down the occasional uprisings and maintaining the nightly curfews. But Iris didn't want to be part of a police force. There was little need for a warrior in a conquered land.

She missed the thrill of battle, the sense of living on a violent precipice, where every moment of life was a victory. And, she hated to admit, she missed the killing. Not that she enjoyed killing; she wasn't crazy. But once you'd done it, you were different. You could never get past it.

She would always remember the first man she killed, a sentry at a Mexican munitions plant. She snuck behind him and stabbed the knife up under his sternum into his heart. For a fleeting moment, as the man died, she experienced a malignant ecstasy, a violent orgasm of murder as the warmth of his blood spilled over her hand and wrist. His moans echoed stillborn in his throat, trapped by her hand cupped firm over his mouth. She felt his body momentarily tense and rise in alarm and awareness of death, and her body rising also. And then his shuddering collapse and her lowering him softly to the ground. At the moment the blade entered the sentry's heart, she changed, broke with Butte, Montana and everything Iris Steel had been. She was a warrior.

Eventually she anesthetized herself to the killing, avoiding it except as a last resort, viewing it with professional detachment. But she couldn't deny her need for the life and death action of the battlefield. Like many of her fellow warriors, she left the military to become a freelance mercenary. Avoiding contracts with foreign interests, with whom she lacked any sense of communality, Iris restricted her business to working for the CIA and multinationals like Intra-Corp, who always needed a hired

gun. The CIA jobs were essential, the agency considering her a resource and allowing her the freedom to operate. But contracts like the Intra-Corp job promised big payoffs with little risk.

From her booth she could see the American's right hand place a small brown package on the table and then shift to the briefcase the oriental man had carried. The oriental man's head suddenly jerked in pain. He clasped his hand to his neck as though stung by an insect and pitched forward, his head thumping to the table. Within seconds the American slumped left into the booth, out of Iris' sight. Something was wrong.

Iris reached into her knapsack and gripped the butt of the Uzi. Someone had shot the men in the booth—looked like tranquilizer darts. The oriental man had grabbed the left side of his neck, meaning the darts came from the direction of the counter and the cook. The waitress screamed as the cook fell back against the grill, howling as his right arm sizzled on the broiler, blood spreading across the front of his white T-shirt. As he slid to the floor, Iris saw a tranqui-dart gun in his left hand, meaning the men she was bodyguarding were still alive.

The child standing on the stool across from the dead cook replaced a silenced pistol into his parka. Damn, Iris thought, the routine nature of the transaction had made her complacent and careless. The "child" was a dwarf named Verchenko, a Soviet killer who often worked with a man and a woman posing as his "parents". The Father was making a play for the holo-chip, lifting the package from under the unconscious Chinese agent.

Iris brought the Uzi to eye level and fired three single shots, eliciting cries of alarm from the rest of the lunch crowd, who ducked under their tables or ran for the door. The first bullet tore off the dwarf's parka hood, striking Verchenko in the temple, flipping him off the stool. The second shot struck the father in the back and the third hit the wife in the neck as she turned to face Iris, killing her instantly. Still on his feet, the father pulled a gun from his coat and fired a wild shot, exploding the clear bubble of the soft drink cooler, splashing glass and juice across the counter. From her seat Iris fired a fourth shot spinning the father around and knocking him into the booth table. With a dying effort as he fell, the Soviet agent hurled the brown package through the picture window and into the alley.

Iris grabbed her backpack and leapt from the booth. The Russians had a backup and he or she was in the alley outside the diner picking up the holo-chip. "Stay down," she yelled to the panicked customers as she flipped the Uzi to automatic and, running towards the large window, sprayed it with bullets. Using the table where the unconscious agents lay as a springboard, she launched herself through the shattered window and tucked into a tight crouch. The gunshots and the broken glass announced

her coming, so she fired blindly into the alley to cover her entrance. As she dropped the eight feet to the snow-covered concrete, she noticed the exit to Broadway on her right and a figure lying in the snow to her left. Whoever the fourth agent was, she had him trapped. She hit the ground and rolled onto her left knee, her right leg thrust straight to her side, the backpack in her left hand, the Uzi trained on the trenchcoated figure agilely rising from the snow, right hand half way into his coat pocket. "Freeze. Take that hand out of your pocket very slowly."

"Ahh. Iris Steel." The man, who appeared to be in his mid-forties, spoke in a thick brogue as he carefully removed his gloved hand from his pocket and stood straight. His left hand held the holo-chip package. His open grey trenchcoat and bright green sweater underneath were both covered with snow from the alley. "You're looking as fetchin' as ever, dear." He slightly tipped the bowler derby on his head in mock courtesy as a humorless smile cracked his handsome but cruel face. "I haven't seen you since we jobbed those Aussie Labor goons in '83. As I recall we worked together quite effectively. And I'm sure ya remember our playin' was even more effective."

"Shut up, Angus. Toss the holo-chip to me or I'll shoot you and take it myself."

He jerked his head toward the diner. "There's probably two million dollars in that suit case in thar. More than Intra-Corp's payin' ya. It's all yahrs if ya let me walk out o' this alley. For old times sake."

Iris slowly shook her head. "No deals, Angus. The chip."

"Oh yes, the famed Iris Steel loyalty to her employ'r. I found that so quaint in Australia. Bit of a pain in the arse now, though." He dipped his head slightly to his left in resignation, "I guess we do it yahr way." He tossed the package toward Iris, but as his arm came level with the ground, a knife shot from a sling up his sleeve, overtaking the box's slow flight and scraping the right side of Iris' neck as she rolled to her left. She had worked with Angus Cronin before and knew his fondness for knives. If not for this familiarity, she'd be dead.

She also knew he was going for a second knife in his right pocket the instant he threw the package. It was that movement which alerted her to the first knife. She fired the Uzi as she rolled, sending Cronin leaping for cover behind two garbage cans. Exposed as she was, she couldn't allow Cronin any cover. She emptied the remainder of the Uzi's clip into the cans, shredding the aluminum and scattering the garbage over Cronin, who rolled head over foot to where he had stood a moment ago.

Iris ejected the empty ammo clip and reached into the backpack for a second clip. No time. Cronin wouldn't let her reload. Propped on his side, he flung the second knife with an arching back handed swipe. Dropping the Uzi, Iris caught the knife with the backpack, the blade sticking

in the canvas. She had to maneuver in close, deny Cronin the distance advantage that the knives gave him. She had weapons but no time to remove them from the knapsack. Then the knapsack would have to be the weapon. Rising to her feet and charging, she heaved the pack into Cronin's face, staggering him back.

Leaping the remaining distance between them, Iris slashed a kick to Cronin's jaw as she landed. She spun, crashed an elbow to his face, breaking his nose, and jabbed two swift punches, knocking him down.

"Lousy slut," Cronin swore upending Iris with a leg sweep. Struggling to clear his head, Cronin slid deeper into the alley, as Iris bounced to her feet and advanced on him. Flinging his left hand across his body, the Irish killer sprayed the alley with a handful of caltrops, small razor sharp, multi-pronged steel balls, one striking Iris in the abdomen, doubling her over. Pulling himself to his feet, Cronin produced a set of electrified numchuks and activated their charge. Cronin's gloves were obviously insulated, but a direct blow could cripple or kill Iris.

"Your gettin old Angus. Relying on weapons too much."

"I'll be your death, woman." He rushed her, swinging the numchuks in furious but controlled swipes, the current sinisterly crackling. Iris leapt into a reverse handspring, evading Cronin's blow, but the caltrop wound tore as she extended her midsection to execute the flip. Moaning she fell on her side like a wounded animal. The pain was excruciating. Cronin's footsteps crunched in the snow and the numchuks cut the air as he twirled them. Face half buried in the snow, she spied the backpack lying twenty feet to her left, where Cronin once stood. She had to reach the pack. But Cronin's next strike came from the direction of the backpack, forcing her to roll to her right. Swearing loudly, Cronin pressed the attack. The police would arrive soon to investigate the gunshots. He had to finish the fight and escape with the chip before they arrived. He pursued her through the alley, the crackling numchuks calling the steps as Iris, blood dripping from her side, leapt, jumped and spun a lethal choreography.

She was tiring, his blows becoming harder to dodge as the wound sapped her strength. The pack lay fifteen feet behind Cronin. She had to reach it now, at any cost.

Snarling, Cronin swung a horizontal strike. Instead of backing away, Iris ducked under the swing and into Cronin, punching his ribs and leaping past him. Cronin timed his swing with her leap, striking a glancing blow across her back. She skidded to a stop near the pack, her back aching.

She pulled the knife loose from the pack as he rushed her, right arm drawn back, twirling the numchuks. Iris rose unsteadily to one knee and threw the knife, lodging it in Cronin's shoulder, severing his trapezoid muscle. The numchuks dropped to the snow, sparked and sizzled as they shorted out. "Bitch! Ya've crippled me. This isn't over. I'll kill you for

this.” He backed away surveying his dangling right arm. Iris reached into the pack for a dagger, a shuriken — anything she could use to finish the fight, but Cronin, turning to flee the alley, exploded a pair of tetsubishi smoke bombs to cover his retreat and ran from the alley.

Iris picked up the pack and the box containing the holo-chip. She supposed she had won. The Russians and the cook, whoever he worked for, were dead and she’d beaten Cronin. Of course the holo-chip sale failed, but that wasn’t her responsibility. The unconscious American in the diner had to answer for this fiasco, provided she could drag him from the restaurant which, considering her exhaustion and the hole in her side, wouldn’t be easy.”

“Ms. Steel.” Iris tensed and looked up at the short, fat chauffeur entering the alley. She recognized him as a company driver. He had probably driven the Intra-Corp agent to the diner. “Hurry along, Ms. Steel. The police will be here any moment. We’ve got to get you to the company hospital.” He ran through the blood-stained snow in short, careful steps, gathered the Uzi and gripped Steel’s arm, pulling her toward the limousine at the mouth of the alley. “Don’t worry about Mr. Marston and Mr. Li, I’ve already loaded them and the money in the limo.”

The chauffeur helped Iris into the back of the limo where the American and the oriental man slept off the tranquilizer, and climbed into the driver’s seat. Iris’s head buzzed; she might soon join her car-mates in unconsciousness. “What’s your name, driver?” she asked.

“My name’s Otis, Ms.Steel,” the driver answered, concentrating as he forced the car into the mid-day traffic.

“You do nice work, Otis,” she said slumping into the plush upholstery.

Chapter 10

Irwin nervously pulled at his collar and glanced at his watch again. He'd been sitting for over thirty minutes in the baroque antechamber of the Highfather's personal quarters, adjacent to the elaborate temple of the Brother and Sisterhood of the Abyss. Irwin entertained vain hopes that the Highfather would find a reason to cancel their dinner. He had met the current Highfather's predecessor and had often dealt with members of the church hierarchy, but none of these people intimidated him as the current Highfather did. It was a combination of his personal charisma and his intense belief in the radical doctrine he preached which made him so formidable. Since its founding, the Brother and Sisterhood had warned of the need for people to purify themselves to face the catastrophe the church believed was imminent. But since the current Highfather assumed the pulpit five years ago, ascending through the church hierarchy with unprecedented speed, the stance of the church changed from one of reacting to their situation, to an almost active courtship with armageddon. At times, the Highfather seemed nearly delighted with the world ending potential of the time anomalies.

The room's only door finally opened and a tall Apocalypse entered the room, brushing his long black hair from his shoulder with a completely masculine gesture.

"The Highfather will see you now," he said motioning to Irwin who hastily straightened his collar and fell in behind his guide, who led him down a marble-floored hallway, past the corridor leading to the ceremony room and towards the Highfather's private dining room. Irwin's stomach churned in anxiety. He knew the cult leader was ecstatic over Cooper's defeat but he also knew more than gratitude or joy prompted this dinner.

The Apocalypse tugged open the ornately carved front door to the Highfather's living quarters and led Irwin through a sitting room cluttered with antique furniture and glass, hand crafted lounges and a staggering collection of clocks: full cabinet 19th century grandfather clocks, digital read out clocks, an atomic clock, sundials, stopwatches, cuckoo clocks, beating out the sharp, steady percussion of time. Irwin noted the irony of an end of the world church so well endowed in Earthly riches.

Irwin's guide abandoned him at the entrance of a monastically spartan stone walled dining room, with a long wooden table flanked by benches stretching away from him. The Highfather sat at the head of the table, his shoulders and head veiled by the shadows just beyond the glow of the table's candelabras, the room's only source of light. "Hello Irwin. Please sit down," he gestured to his right, "We're having lamb. I hope that's satisfactory."

"Yes. Yes that's fine," he said nervously sitting down. He had never been this near the Highfather before and had rarely seen him outside the ceremonies, where the Doom Mask obscured his features. Despite the dim light, Irwin could see intense dark eyes staring from a strong featured face, masked by a sand colored beard. In his mid-forties, he had an athlete's upper body, and although he wore a simple but well tailored black tunic he retained the charismatic presence he projected when preaching. What disturbed Irwin most, however, was how familiar the Highfather seemed. Irwin was sure he'd met him before.

"Simon," the Highfather gestured to his manservant, whom Irwin hadn't noticed, standing beside the kitchen entrance, "some wine for my guest. Its Emile' Burgundy, 1993." Bazelon knew nothing about wine, but, he observed, the bottle must have been hermetically stored because the label lacked any discoloration from its ninety-four years of storage.

"To the general doom." The Highfather lifted his own already filled glass, with Irwin uneasily joining the toast. He had joined the cult because he believed mankind was condemning itself through its immoral vices and areligious mores. He did not, like the Highfather and the more fanatical worshippers, embrace Armageddon.

Draining his glass, the Highfather leaned into the candle light and placed a hand atop Bazelon's. "Bless you Irwin. You have helped me undo everything. I will always remember your contribution." Irwin's eyes widened in horror as the Highfather's features became fully visible in the candle light.

"I . . . You . . . I know" he could scarcely breath to speak.

"You recognize me Irwin? Or at least you think you do. I suppose you of all people deserve an explanation." He stood up and moved to the window behind him, where the moonlight shone silver on his face. "You see I am not of this reality. Rather this reality is of me. The twenty-first century I knew is not this 2087. Cooper is right. Kennedy shouldn't have died. In my reality he served two terms and was succeeded in 1968 by a peaceful Lyndon Johnson presidency. History, as you can imagine was quite different. But there were similar trends between that reality and this one. Time travel became the hot science in my twenty-first century also and I became the first man to enter the fourth dimension."

He turned his familiar profile to Irwin, his eyes staring into the silver

and black night. “Your experiments failed, so you can’t imagine my exhilaration the first time I entered the continuum. The exquisite loneliness of having exceeded human limitation.” His voice began the slow ascent it climbed when he preached. “Using my shift vehicle, I toured history observing the great events and people of the ages. I traveled to Greece and watched Archimedes drawing in the sand, struggling to invent calculus and being killed by Roman soldiers. I observed the imperial Caesar grow soft and weak in his power. I conversed with Newton and Einstein and knew I had answered questions which had stymied even their genius. I observed Alexander the Great who, at thirty-three had conquered the world, and knew I was his superior because I had conquered his world and all others at once. I witnessed Adolf Hitler’s rise and conceived a horror more sublime than even his diseased mind could comprehend.” He looked down to Irwin again. “I had surveyed the giants of history and found no peers.”

Irwin’s face was damp with sweat but his mouth was dry and a sharp pain stung his abdomen.

“But having achieved this power, having gained this perspective, what was I to do next? When you time shift, Irwin, you ride a fourth dimensional netherspace from where you can observe the oscillations of the continuum as though it were a laboratory subject. I realized how accidental and unnecessary history was. I began to hypothesize experiments I could perform upon my subject. How would the continuum react to various stimuli — changing the outcome of a battle, preventing the meeting of important world leaders, sabotaging global summit meetings, murdering a historical figure.

“But the simplest change and the one offering the greatest potential for catastrophe, was the murdering of a world historical figure who was not killed in the normal course of history. But this approach offered a problem of selection. The number of people whose deaths would significantly change history was infinite. But not just anyone would do. This would be the most important death of all times. The life I claimed needed to be of sufficient stature to be worthy of the event.

“As I debated the appropriateness and importance of each historical figure and their eras, I realized my destiny lie in mid-twentieth century America. Never in history has a nation-state achieved the degree of pre-eminence enjoyed by the post-World War II United States, the nation’s industrial and technological might enabling it to dominate a war devastated globe with an immediacy of influence that more formal and tyrannical empires could only envy. The vitality and purposeful energy stored in a civilization too young to understand limitation was explosive. And John Kennedy embodied that post-war American confidence. He portrayed, on a global stage, the country’s ideal image of itself — the millionaire public

servant, the democratic prince, the reposed leading man. Nothing in modern American history equaled Kennedy and his brothers at the peak of their power. Believe me, Irwin. I saw how it should have ended.

“Thus while I could have killed Churchill or Magellan or any of a dozen Russian emperors or English kings, I knew I had to remove him. I had to shatter the image through which an empire’s identity flowed. Such an action would be worthy of the cataclysm I sought to provoke.”

The Highfather stepped to the table, the reflection of the candle’s light in his eyes competing with his own ambitious flame. Irwin gulped the rest of his wine, his thirst inexplicably growing the more he drank. “So I traveled to 1963 and orchestrated the Kennedy Assassination,” the Highfather said in a stunning anti-climax. “As the assassin’s bullets struck, I was in my time machine, safely ensconced in a fourth dimensional stasis. I wasn’t sure what to expect. Would there be an explosion? Cosmic pyrotechnics? Radiation surges? Would my eyes register any change at all? Would I even survive the event?” He shrugged. “The moment Kennedy was killed my instruments recorded violent disruptions. But the continuum didn’t collapse. A history still existed between 1963 and 2085, but, I realized, it had to be a history radically different from the one I’d left. When I returned to 2085 things were different. The Boston I knew no longer existed, replaced by unfamiliar buildings and streets.” His voice tensed again, “Uncontrollably excited, I ran to the nearest library and tore through the first history book I could find. My jubilant cries knifed through the quiet of the library. Page after page recounting 170 years of unfamiliar history. New events, people and stories all carrying my unseen signature.” The Highfather’s eyes were wild with emotion. Irwin was openly sweating and his stomach torn by pain.

“My experiments not only expunged one reality but created a second. I was both chaos-bringer and life-giver. I created you, Irwin.” He adopted a histrionic tenderness. “Created everything you’ve ever experienced. Homeless, I decided your Apocalypse obsessed religion provided a fitting base from which to observe my handiwork. Unfortunately my hand-made reality is unstable. My experiment seems destined to end with the collapse of this continuum. And you, Irwin, have guaranteed that collapse.

“Cooper is right. His time machine will work. But thanks to you, as the anomalies reach critical mass, President Grant has vacillated and denied Cooper his time sphere.” Irwin was near tears, the pain in his stomach doubling him over. “It will soon be time for me to leave,” the Highfather said almost nonchalantly as he once again sat at the head of the table. “I’ll be shifting into the fourth dimension from where I can monitor the collapse. But sentimental man that I am, I thought I owed you at least some explanation.”

Irwin’s vision blurred. “You can’t . . . I won’t let . . .”

“You won’t let me? I’m sorry Irwin. You don’t believe I can let you leave after having revealed myself, do you?” Eyes bulging, stomach enflamed, Irwin clutched the envenomed wine glass, pained gasps choking from his throat as he slide to the floor.

Two Apocalytes entered from the kitchen and gathered up Irwin’s body, carrying him out the door he had entered. The Highfather removed the napkin from his plate. “Simon, I’ll have my lamb now.”

Chapter 11

Bridgette slumped in her chair and nervously shifted her eyes across the sitting room, from the clock to the two men sitting across the room from her. After an initial period of strained silence, broken by occasional small talk, the two had fallen into a debate over the United Nations proposed global curriculum for high school students, opposed by most Western nations and academicians. But their debate lacked conviction, as they were seeking only to ignore the tension building as they waited for Iris Steel's arrival.

"I'm not a big fan of the global curriculum either. But, the Third World is demanding some action and they hold the votes. The U.S. and Soviets are going to have to compromise and I think the latest version is the best we're likely to see," the balding black man said.

The silver haired old man shrugged his shoulders, "Ideologically slanted textbooks drawing moral equivalencies between imperialism and Nazism is hardly a defensible compromise," he countered not quite making eye contact with his opponent.

"You're basing your assumptions on a few leaked manuscripts of rejected texts. The omni-syllabus hasn't even been written yet. The West will certainly have its editorial impact."

"Like the West's input on those tawdry newscasts?" Bridgette noticed Alex Blue stiffen slightly at William Stein's jab, but his response remained largely indifferent.

"There are people seeking to make the WIA a more responsible organization."

Glancing at the clock again, Bridgette finally lost her patience and, deciding that being a proper hostess was hardly important, excused herself and exited through the double doors, at the rear of the sitting room, leading to her father's study.

As she entered the room, she noted the increased disarray of the study since the hearing with the President. Since the President's tightening of Tempus Frangit security, her father assumed his lab to be bugged, and worked at home whenever possible. "I don't think Iris Steel is going to

show, Dad,” she announced to her father and Carl both bent over layers of charts spread across the antique mahogany desk dominating the cramped study. Neither man acknowledged her entrance. She smiled uneasily at the bald, round-faced oriental man, dressed in a green one piece garment, sitting patiently on the sofa near the wall to her right. Her father had introduced him as Mr. Woo, but failed to explain his reason for being there. Surely her father wasn’t considering including this odd looking man in the crew. “She’s almost forty minutes late,” she added circling the desk to the corner opposite her father. “Excuse me, but do either of you care that our mercenary’s just stood us up?”

Adam didn’t look up. “Give her a few more minutes. We can use the time here.”

“Problem?” she asked, sliding her hip onto the edge of the desk.

“Possibly,” Adam straightened, the taunt grimace of concentration slowly fading from his face. “Our departure risk factor just increased appreciably.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It appears President Grant was correct.” Carl said, still hunched over the desk. “We aren’t as prepared as we thought.”

“Are you saying the sphere won’t work? Dad? What’s wrong?”

Adam rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m still confident we can go to null grav and navigate the continuum. The problem lies with the continuum itself. We’ve been basing all our assumptions on travel through a stable reality.”

“Unfortunately,” Carl said stretching a different chart atop the pile, “the continuum is deteriorating even more rapidly than we’d anticipated. This graph plots the location, size and duration of the anomalies.” He traced his fingers along several curves of a penta-axial hypergraph. “Obviously it indicates a steady upward progression in all monitored categories. Now look here.” Bridgette leaned closer as Carl indicated areas where the curves soared upward in arching parabolas. “In the last forty-five days, the sphere’s chronal scanners measured exponential increases in nearly every anomaly indicator.”

“I figured that just from reading the papers. The bombing of that hospital in England, a Zeppelin attempting to occupy the same space as a Buddhist temple in Tokyo and disappearing in a burst of flames. They’re not only getting bigger, they’re starting to kill people. But how do they affect our journey? The continuum too unstable?”

Adam explained: “When we achieve zero gravity and pierce the dimensional barrier, we’ll create a localized disruption in the time/space continuum. If you remember, that’s how we detected the presence of the rogue time shifter, by monitoring his exits and entrances along the continuum. But he traveled in a healthy continuum, so his disruptions were

minimal. In tearing such unstable dimensional barriers, we risk creating a temporary anomaly portal.”

“Meaning we’ll actually create anomalies?”

Adam nodded, “There’s no telling what may happen once we begin losing mass. The lab could fill with displaced objects and people.”

Bridgette rolled her eyes. “Wooooo. Is this going to happen in 1963 too?”

“Fortunately no. The sphere will never actually enter 1963. Rather,” Adam searched for a word, “I’ll . . . ‘park’ it in a stasis, immeasurably close to, but not touching three dimensional space. The crew will exit the sphere and appear in 3-D space without significantly tearing the continuum.”

The intercom buzzed and glowed green, indicating someone was at the front door. “That must be Steel,” Bridgette said slipping from the desk and leaving the room. She crossed though the sitting room, past William and Alex who had abandoned their conversation at the sound of the buzzer. She released the lock on the door, allowing it to slide open, revealing the towering figure of Iris Steel, dressed in black. Bridgette involuntarily retreated a step. “You have to be Iris Steel. Please come in.”

“Sorry I’m late,” she said entering the apartment, offering no explanation and not sounding contrite.

“Let me introduce you to the others.” Alex and William stood. “Dr. William Stein from Harvard and Alexander Blue from the United Nations, meet Iris Steel.” Bridgette didn’t give them a chance to exchange more than glances. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll summon my father and Dr.Czernak.”

Iris followed Bridgette, walking between the two men who were still standing and occupied a chair near the wall adjoining Cooper’s study.

Alex and William sat, turning their attention to Iris. Having just achieved a degree of familiarity with one another, they turned to assimilate the stranger in black. “So Ms. Steel, what type of work are you in?” Blue asked, immediately realizing his gaffe and drawing a sour look from William. Steel didn’t answer. “Professor Stein and I were just discussing the U.N.’s proposed global curriculum. I don’t know if you’ve followed . . . its been in all the papers.”

“Don’t feel you need to include me. I not interested in what you’re talking about.” Iris’ bluntness preempted Alex and William from resuming their strained conversation and the three of them waited in silence.

Finally, the door to the study opened and Adam, wearing a blue lab coat over a brown shirt and flanked by Carl and Bridgette, who carried several log books bearing the Tempus Frangit imprint, entered the room. He quickly exchanged greetings with the three newcomers and introduced them to Carl Czernak. Bridgette curled a leg under her and sat on the

arm of the chair she had occupied earlier, as the others resumed sitting, ceding the floor to Adam and Carl. Adam began. "I'm grateful to you for answering my call. You're all aware, to varying degrees, of my attempts to solve the time crisis and how I believe I have the answer to the anomaly problem. That's where you three come in. I need your help if I'm to succeed, and if you'll allow me to explain everything, I'll answer all your questions."

Adam launched into his explanation of the time crisis, telling how the time anomalies harbingered disaster and how the Kennedy assassination held the key to the crisis; shared the existence of the rogue time traveler; lectured on the essentials of time travel and detailed the limitations of the mission; recounted his and Carl's testimony and the President's rejection; revealed his decision to steal the time sphere. Within an hour they knew more about the crisis than most people and were therefore more confused. "All that's left is to assemble a mission team and break into Tempus Frangit. That's why you're here. I'm asking you to join the crew of the time sphere. I realize this could be quite a sacrifice . . ."

"Could?" Alex sarcastically echoed. "Your asking us to become criminals, sacrifice our careers, risk our lives. Yeah, that could be a sacrifice."

Stein added, "Why choose the three of us?"

"You people possess the various personalities and abilities needed for this mission."

"That includes your charming daughter?" William Stein asked.

"Yes," Adam became slightly defensive. "She's studied the period. Probably knows it better than anyone in this room with the exception of yourself."

"I assume you're expecting violence, or you wouldn't be retaining me." Iris Steel said.

"I'm hoping to avoid violence if possible, but yes I want to cover every contingency. And I must say up front Ms. Steel that I can't afford to pay you. I'm hoping you'll approach this mission as your duty to mankind."

"Duty to mankind?" Iris repeated, her voice indicating her dubious view of Adam's suggestion.

"The logistics of the mission are relatively straightforward: I'll remain in the time sphere from where I'll coordinate your activities. There are a variety of strategies we could employ. Using persuasion and wit, we can attempt to convince people close to Kennedy that his life is in danger. Or we could try to physically stop the assassins or possibly enlist the aid of the FBI or secret service. The sheer number of options requires my assembling as diverse a team as possible." Adam gestured to Bridgette who was still holding the log books. "Bridgette will distribute mission

books to each of you. The books will familiarize you with names, addresses and schedules of most of the people in the Kennedy Administration as well as biographical notes and background information. Most of the research is compliments of Dr. Stein's graduate students. William, I apologize for not informing you about how I was using the information. I believed the President would approve the mission. I didn't mean to make you an accessory to a crime without your knowledge."

William waved his hand dismissing Adam's concern, "I understand, Adam. After your press conference it was fairly obvious what you were planning."

"Take the manuals home with you and study them closely, because you won't be able to take them with you to 1963."

"Why not?" Alex asked, accepting a book from Bridgette.

Adam explained to his recruits the constraints on time travel which prevented matter from existing in two places at one time. "Our bodies are structurally complex enough to endure the stress, but something like a book would simply disappear the nano-second it exited the fourth dimension. This fact unfortunately prohibits us from carrying back a newspaper reporting the assassination or a history textbook published since 1963, which would have greatly simplified our jobs. Ultimately, the success of our mission depends on our level of resourcefulness, mastery of information and knowledge of key people surrounding the President."

William held up his hand, signaling Adam's attention. "Not to change the subject, Adam, but who is that fellow behind you?" William pointed to the oriental man who had silently entered the room behind Adam and Carl.

Adam spun around. "Oh. I'm sorry Woo; I didn't see you there." The old man smiled as though pleased Adam hadn't heard him. Adam turned to the rest of the room. "This is Mr. Woo. He's here to discuss with me his fascinating line of work. Mr. Woo specializes in developing organic micro-circuits. He'll enable us to communicate to one another in the past, by grafting the communications circuitry to our skin through a process popular in the twentieth century—tattooing.

Bridgette, who had returned to her seat on the arm of the chair, cringed. "I've seen pictures of those things. Do I have to spend the rest of my life with a dragon or a heart burned on my arm?"

"It's not like that Bridgette. Mr. Woo can you explain?"

Woo stiffly moved forward. "With pleasure, doctor. The circuitry is integrated with the tattoo's inks, which are applied with a precision laser. The tattoos can be ornate works of art or disguised as a hardly noticeable birthmark. A microscopic transmitter will be grafted somewhere onto your arm, while the receiver will be located within your ear." He smiled a

benign but not altogether comforting smile. "And the process, I assure you, is painless."

Adam regained the floor. "When you're in the field, you'll be responsible for calling me to receive assignments and report progress. This way I won't be interrupting you during critical meetings or situations."

"I don't like this at all," Blue complained. "Tattoos and stasis fields." He pointed at Czernak. "You want to turn our bodies into light?"

Carl spoke for the first time. "The matter/photon transformation isn't dangerous. My computers have a near hundred percent success rate in disassembling and reassembling objects in the laboratory. The only possible side effects could be some temporary weakness and nausea, similar to radiation sickness."

"But the radiation levels are acceptable?" Blue queried.

"External radiation doesn't present a problem." Carl continued, his accented voice assuming a professorial edge. "In your light forms you'll be impervious to the radiation from the continuum. Any discomfort you experience will result from your own bodies being transformed into energy and back to matter."

Blue persisted, "That can't be healthy. I don't care how many times you've tested it on lab rats."

"Certainly it is not a process you would wish to undergo repeatedly, as it is physiologically taxing," Carl conceded. "But I assure you it is not life threatening."

"If I may return to questions of strategy." Attention shifted to William Stein. "What prevents us from materializing the time sphere near Kennedy and just carrying him onboard?"

"A fair question," Cooper nodded. "It's extremely difficult to identify and then lock the navigational systems onto as particular an arrival point as the immediate space around Kennedy. Ironically, the disturbances near the Dallas/Fort Worth area enabled us to more easily focus on that area and that's one of the reasons we chose this port of entry. Eventually we hope to refine the navigational systems, but that requires time we don't have. The same is true for the Sphere's spatial mobility. With the null-grav systems, it would be relatively easy to propel the sphere over distances, but, again, we don't have the time to integrate a propulsion system. We're lucky to have the sphere as operational as it is."

"And it's impossible to allow someone from the domestic time on board the sphere, since before anyone can be permitted to enter, his or her cellular matrix must be stored in the computers and we won't be able to bring the necessary equipment back with us. Besides, we have to insure Kennedy's personal progression through time, up to November 22 remains as uninterrupted as possible, so that history unfolds correctly. Pulling him outside of time could be disruptive to the continuum. Incidentally, an

opticom in my lab downstairs is currently scanning this room, reading everyone's matrices. Should you decide to join me, you'll already be entered in sphere's system."

"Something's not right here." Iris, who'd been quiet during most of the question and answer, said suspiciously. "You're not telling us something."

"I think what Ms. Steel means, Adam, is that we're all having some trouble comprehending such unfamiliar concepts," Alex mediated.

Steel fired a brief, hard glance at Alex. "No. I meant he's holding out on us."

The room tensed, as Adam warily considered Iris. "Your instincts are quite sharp, Ms. Steel." He looked to Bridgette and then Carl and inhaled deeply, priming himself to answer. "There is something else I need to explain. I'm not trying to hide it from you, but I wanted to deal with other issues first. If we succeed in saving Kennedy, the time line we inhabit will cease to exist, replaced by a legitimate history where Kennedy lived." No one reacted; the room was silent. Alex leaned forward in his seat, his face twisted in concern. "This will alter your lives beyond recognition. When we return, your spouse may be married to someone else. Your friends may not know you. Many of your loved ones may not exist at all." His voice slowly deepened, becoming grimmer. "No one will welcome us back as heroes. No one will try to arrest us as criminals. No one will even know we've done anything, except possibly our adversary. We will face extremely lonely lives. We'll have to start over."

An executioner's quiet filled the room.

After a moment Adam spoke. "I can't ask you to make a decision right now, but if you can contact me tomorrow . . ."

"What decision, Cooper?" Iris sneered. "You've just told us we don't have any choice."

Cooper met Steel's stare, then turned his gaze around the room, lingering on the grim faces arranged about him. He moved the conversation back to issues of logistics. In failing to answer Iris' challenge, he was affirming her suspicions. "There isn't much room on the sphere, so you won't be able to bring any personal items back, outside of a holo of your family or loved ones, maybe one or two small personal mementos, but nothing more. Carl, Bridgette and I are selecting items to save from our time line. Books, holos, that kind of thing. I'd welcome any suggestions you have in that area. If you'll excuse us now, Carl and I have much to do."

Chapter 12

The winter sun had already sunk from Adam's view as the evening crept through Harvard yard. Aside from the occasional passing student, the square was desolate, as it usually was during dinner hour. The evening grew chillier with the darkness, the several feet of snow on either side of the sidewalk radiating cold.

He shouldn't be here. So much needed to be done before he could attempt to steal the sphere, but he needed the time to think. About Maggie, the crisis and himself, because he realized he hadn't squarely faced the coming disaster. Not really. He'd analyzed it, theorized about it, slaved to prevent it. But he hadn't confronted it as it affected Adam Cooper. He had convinced himself he couldn't afford to feel, but as the time for action approached, the crisis, Maggie and the past, inevitably met.

Although she never said it, Adam was certain Bridgette hoped her mother might be alive in the legitimate 2087. She wouldn't be Maggie Cooper, but she might never have died. She might still be living somewhere and Bridgette could perhaps locate her.

But Adam knew the truth. Coldly stated, the odds of anyone existing in both the bogus and legitimate 2087 were incalculably close to zero. A woman impregnated prior to November 22 would give birth to the same baby regardless of Kennedy's fate. But from the very second after the President's motorcade safely passes the School Book Depository Building, lives would be radically altered. If Kennedy lives, the country doesn't undergo three days of national mourning, with the population glued to its television sets. Instead, millions of Americans would have lived three normal late November days: going to work, meeting people they wouldn't have met if they were watching the President's funeral, having accidents they wouldn't have had and so on. The two histories diverging by the second, increasing the odds of a person being born to both times.

Saving Kennedy and repairing the continuum would mean expunging his wife's existence, leaving no trail of friends who remembered her, no hospital records, no photographs or fingerprints. Nothing to prove that this funny, attractive, woman had ever existed.

Was their love an anomaly as well. Their courtship, love-making, child rearing, domestic quarrelling all to be ruthlessly erased. And what about the billions of other people in the last 127 years? Were all their lives equally futile?

He stopped beside a powerful elm tree, pressing his eyes closed and clenching his fists inside his jacket pockets. It was too frustrating. He couldn't accept the consequences of what he had to do. Some abysses were just too dark to look at.

He stood still for five minutes, then ten, then fifteen, until he heard a bird chirping and thought he'd lost his mind. In disbelief he stared into the Elms' branches, spotting a thin, jaundice bellied robin, forlornly singing as it attempted to burrow into a humble nest. "You should have gone south," he thought to himself. "You aren't proving anything."

No. He turned from the bird and strode towards the Brattle street exit of the square.

No. No.No. No. No.

He would be alive in the legitimate 2087 and Maggie's life remained in his memories, just as her physical traces and personality appeared in Bridgette. She existed and would continue to exist as long as he and Bridgette were alive. That was enough. It was more than most people would have.

He hurried toward Brattle street, glancing at his watch. Not quite five. He had time to stop at a bakery and buy bread for the robin.

The snow crunched as William traced his own footsteps across the lawn along the outside of the history department. Hugging the precariously stacked books tight against himself, he pressed ahead unsteadily through the uneven mantle of snow. Mostly literature in this pile, all written since November 1963: Updike, Mailer, Roth, Sartre, Capote, Wilbur, Kinzel; novels, articles, stories, plays, poems. They were to become time orphaned words.

Or were they? Wouldn't great writing from this anomaly reality be great writing in the legitimate reality? Wouldn't *The Naked and the Dead* or *In Cold Blood* be of value to the people of any Earth? Cooper said there was room on the sphere for a limited number of personal items. Did he have a duty to preserve some of these books? His library could be a cultural treasure chest in a world where these books didn't exist. The prospect of taking some of his library back to the new time continuum raised puzzling questions. A writer like John Updike was writing before the assassination so it was safe to assume he would continue to write if Kennedy lives. But he surely wouldn't write the same books. What would his reaction be if he were shown a copy of *The Witches of Eastwick*, a

novel written in his style and carrying his name but which he had not written? Would his style even be the same, given a different set of life experiences? What would the authors and their readers make of these time-lost phantom books? Did he have a right to confront a writer with a piece of his career that never was? He simply couldn't see his responsibility in this matter clearly.

He dropped the books into the polyethane barrel he had borrowed from maintenance and dragged through the snow to the lawn behind his office. The barrel was almost full; he had collected quite a number of books in his life.

As he retraced his steps once more, he felt sorry for those writers like Updike who so painfully sought to craft the truth from uncooperative words, only to have everything turn out a lie.

He stomped the snow from his shoes, leaving it to melt into the already soaked carpet. In his office he gathered the last of his post-63 books. He'd saved these for last: his own books and those of his peers, Tuchman, Schlesinger, Nore, Mills. So many pages recording and explaining the past. All junk.

Heading back to the barrel, he didn't feel sorry for the historians. They had fallen victim to the same lie he had. And he wasted no time mourning for his wasted career, which paled in comparison to William's certainty that he was an anomaly. Cooper had tried to soften the blow, saying some people existing now might still exist in the new reality. But William didn't delude himself. One needn't be a mathematician to know that the odds for existing in both realities was minimal, especially when you're the grandson of Caroline Kennedy, the President's daughter. If Kennedy lives, Caroline's life would be radically different. She surely would not marry the same husband and produce the same offspring. If they prevented the assassination, William, like his books, would be orphaned, unhitched from the process. The irony hurt — he was a historian without a past to anchor him.

He dropped this last stack in the barrel which now contained a fair survey of 127 years of achievement in human culture. Everything from Abstract Expressionism to Phenomenological Rationalism, Space shuttles to lunar bases, Vietnam to Brazil.

He unwrapped a Panatella cigar and lit it, puffing hard, the tip glowing red hot through the cloud of smoke hovering before his face. Shifting the cigar to one side of his mouth, William turned his lighter to maximum and dropped it into the barrel.

He smoked the cigar and watched the fire build to a cracking blaze. And as the flames pushed singed shreds of paper into the air, he saw, through his cigar smoke, that he had no choice. These stories, these ideas had to die with their world. The people in the new time would have to

write their own stories.

Caesar leapt from the vid-screen to the plankton and piranha filled seat of the aquarium chair, bounded to the floor, bolted across the six feet of open space, scaled the seemingly sheer leg of the graphite table and jumped onto Iris' shoulder as she opened the doors to the terrace. "Watch what you're doing, Caesar. You're gonna freeze your simian behind out here." She pushed open the terrace and stepped jacketless into the cold night. Breath billowing from her mouth, she rapidly surveyed the starless midnight sky. Raising a hand to the side of her mouth she sounded the familiar cacophony of the bird call. As she waited for a reply, she strapped on the elbow length leather glove. The little monkey shivered violently and deciding warmth to be the better part of valor, climbed down from Iris' shoulder and disappeared into the apartment.

Iris repeated the call and moments later, the eagle silently glided from the darkness, to perch on her arm. "How's the night Orville?" she asked the proud bird as it inched itself along her arm to her wrist. Once nearly extinct, the American Eagle became the major beneficiary of the Endangered Species Genetic Protection and Propagation Act of 2055, which provided for the genetic engineering of a hardier, more fertile species of bald eagle. The program resulted thirty years later in eagles being so plentiful, people began hunting them. Those affluent enough to be exotic purchased them as pets.

With Orville perched on her upper wrist, Iris disconnected the elbow extension and stepped back into the apartment, closing the terrace doors behind her. "O.K. Caesar, I told you it was cold. Come out and I'll feed you." There were plenty of hiding places for the thirty inch monkey in the large rooms of the ill lit apartment. Iris never burned many lights because it made the apartment seem too big. With only Orville and Caesar to live with, she didn't need such a large apartment. But she could afford to live here and the terrace afforded a rare unimpeded view of the Manhattan skyline. Still, she felt it best not to turn on too many lights.

"There you are," she spied the monkey huddled on the wide pillows of the sofa. Orville flew from her hand to the graphite perch, standing by the sofa like a reading lamp. Caesar ran to the base of the perch, only to be warned away with an icy stare and a ruffle of feathers from the eagle. She had owned them both since they were young and this familiarity prevented the bird of prey from ever stalking its roommate. But the monkey was always careful to stay on the eagle's good side. Removing the leather glove, she entered the kitchen and quickly reappeared with a bowl of dates. "I imagine Orville found his dinner in the park." Bending to hand Caesar his food, she grimaced from the still delicate wound in her side. Caesar greedily consumed the dates. "Hungry little guy. You'd think I never feed you."

“Fellows, we need to talk,” she said, the three of them basking in the blue/green glow of the digi-clock embedded in the end table in front of the sofa, the light flickering as the liquid quartz display shifted from second to second. “See I have this new assignment and it ain’t like any of the other ones. No sir. This Dr. Cooper, you know, the one who’s always on the vid-screen, he wants me to go back in time with him and stop John Kennedy from being killed, which he says is the key to the whole time anomaly problem. He says if we save Kennedy we save the whole time continuum.

“Yeah it’s pretty heavy stuff. Only it gets weirder. Dr. Czernak, this little guy with an accent who’s Cooper’s partner, he says the time machine will reduce us to light particles and somehow reassemble us in 1963. Makes Angus Cronin look pretty tame.

“Thing is, I really don’t have a choice whether I should go or not. None of us do; I hope they realize that. This planet’s been fooling itself about the anomalies, trying to ignore them and Cooper’s warnings. But they’re just afraid to face it. Afraid to admit the world’s going to hell. Think the end of the world’s just too cruel to be possible. But it’s not, right guys. We know.”

She patted the couch, prompting Caesar to leap onto her lap. Rubbing his belly she watched the numbers in the clock slowly dance past midnight. “What I’m trying to say, fellows, is that I’m in a no-win scenario. Even if we win, we lose everything that’s precious to us. Which in my case ain’t much except for you two. Don’t worry about it though. I doubt you’ll even realize what’s happening. As for me, hell for a merc this is perfect. I come back to whatever the present should be and I got no background, no fingerprints or retinal patterns on file, not even weapon’s registration forms. Not a single shred of paper proving I exist. Once I learn the political score, I’ll be completely free to operate.

“And it doesn’t really bother me that in this legitimate time, I shouldn’t exist, ’cause I’ve always kinda had that feeling anyhow.” She looked at Orville who appeared to be asleep. “Naa. I don’t think it’ll be that bad.”

She rubbed Caesar’s stomach until he fell asleep in her lap near one in the morning. He was still sleeping there when the sun rose behind her in the morning.

Chapter 13

“Relax a little, Carl. You look like you need a sedative.” Carl nodded his head and anxiously rubbed the ring on his right hand. Taking a deep breath, he tried to convince himself he and Adam were just walking to the lab for another evening’s work. Everything was normal. Nothing to be nervous about. But as they carried their briefcases across the street, Carl noticed that despite the cold weather, the back of his neck was damp with sweat.

They walked toward the entrance of a squat, tan brick building which sat outside the fenced-off grounds of Tempus Frangit. Primarily a maintenance shed, the building also housed an entrance to a private tunnel running from the street to the mall at the center of the compound. Adam and Carl had used this secret entrance exclusively since Adam’s press conference, in order to avoid the mob of reporters and demonstrators which gathered daily in front of the main entrance of the Institute.

They entered the small security room which was manned by two guards and a security drone. Both men were strangers, part of the President’s strengthened security detail. An athletic black guard sat behind a desk to Adam and Carl’s right, watching professional wrestling holos, while the second guard, a soft looking giant with a crew cut, poured two cups of coffee from a dispenser at the rear of the room.

“Evening doctors. Putting in another late night, eh?” the chubby guard asked.

“Yes,” Adam answered, trying to be friendly. “The sooner we finish, the sooner the President will believe we can time shift. Then you fellows can go back to your regular beats.”

The guard watching the vid-screen stood up and leaned huge hands on the table between him and the two scientists. “Gonna have to look in those briefcases Dr. Czernak.” Carl placed his case on the table and self-consciously twisted the ring on his right hand, as the overweight guard carefully carried the steaming cups of coffee towards them. The black guard unlatched the suitcase locks. “Look out, hot coffee.”

Carl thrust his hand under the black guard’s face, flicking the

gemstone in his ring open with his thumb. A puff of purple gas shot into the guard's eyes. He stiffened, stared in surprise at Carl and toppled onto the vid-screen.

Adam dropped his case. Carl's nerves had gotten the best of him. He'd acted before Adam's target was within the ring's range. Lunging forward, Adam released the gas from his ring, but the heavy guard proved deceptively quick, ducking the sedating cloud and shoving Adam back with his shoulder. Dropping the coffee cups, the guard reached for his pistol. But Adam, regaining his balance, swung a vicious right to the guard's head, knocking him out.

Looking up from the fallen guard Adam came face-to-face with the menacing countenance of the security drone.

"Get down," a voice yelled from behind. Adam and Carl both dropped to the floor as they heard the muffled report of a silenced Uzi, immediately followed by a sharp clanking impact. The drone sizzled, sparked and dropped lifeless to the floor.

Iris Steel slipped into the room, carrying her Uzi 2000 and dressed for combat in a multi-pocketed flak battle vest. "I told you you had to be close to use those rings. Nice punch though, Cooper. You guys O.K.?"

"Fine." Adam said, regaining his feet. "What did you use on the drone? Static bullets?"

"Yeah," she said, moving to the door and talking into the small rose tattooed to her inner arm. "O.K. Bridgette. Come across."

Bridgette, Alex and William hustled across the street from the rented car they had been waiting in. All three wore back packs and Bridgette and Alex each carried a second pack, giving one to Adam and Carl. The packs contained the twentieth century clothing they'd need on the mission. Adam indicated a door marked "janitor". "The entrance to the tunnel's through there. Let's stay together and move as quickly as possible." Using Adam's Tempus Frangit I.D. card, Iris opened the tunnel door. Because only a select few knew of the passage's existence, its locking mechanisms were crude. They filed through the door, with William at the end of the line. "How are you doing, William?"

"I'm fine, Adam. I'll make these old bones keep up."

Bridgette dropped back beside him. "Don't worry, Dad. I'll make sure he keeps up."

They jogged through the ill-lit tunnel, Iris at the point, reloading her Uzi as she ran, replacing the static bullets with a cartridge of non-lethal stun pellets. Adam followed close behind her with Alex and Carl on his heels and William and Bridgette trailing.

Arriving at the end of the hallway, they climbed the steps leading to a doorway which opened onto the mall at the center of the compound. The usual guard detail for the buildings surrounding them, was two guards

operating the automated security systems. But since the President's order, some buildings, including the Cooper/Czernak lab, housed as many as a half dozen human security guards and a cadre of drones.

Adam's lab lay one hundred yards to the left. The exposed mall concourse stretching before them seemed miles long.

Iris produced a handful of black grenades as the rest of the team slid infra-red goggles over their eyes. "Shadow bombs," Iris explained. "They produce a field of total darkness, over a limited area, lasting about thirty seconds. But I estimate you'll only have ten seconds from the time you leave this tunnel, to reach the lab. The guards will notice us the instant the first grenade goes off. It will take them about two seconds to react, another four seconds to draw their weapons and to activate their infra-red scopes and three to four seconds minimum to locate a target, aim and fire. We'll be cutting it close, but we should make it. You better keep up, old man," she warned Stein, who resolutely nodded his head. "Alright then," she inserted Adam's I.D. card into the lock, "let's party."

Sliding her own goggles on, Iris pushed open the door, tossed a grenade and bolted toward the lab, throwing grenades one-at-a-time, twenty yards apart, forming an ebon corridor between the tunnel exit and the lab. The time travelers sprinted after her, with Adam and Carl leaving first. Although they had spent the last few days surreptitiously preparing the sphere for a shift, they would still need a few minutes in the lab, to power up the opticomps and the grav-field generators.

Three seconds. In the eerie, clouded, infra-red world ahead of him Adam saw Iris blow the lab door open with a uni-directional explosive capsule and leap through the smoke filled doorway. Bursts of gunfire sounded from the lab and then silence. He was almost at the door. If Iris had been shot, he was going to have a hostile welcoming.

Five seconds. He reached the lab, with a surprisingly fleet Carl Czernak behind him. Two security guards sprawled amid the pieces of an exploded drone. "She's good, Carl. Fast too, she must be nearing the lab already.

Sirens blared to life in the compound.

Seven Seconds. Carl stepped aside to admit a gasping Alex Blue. "I think I pulled a hamstring," he coughed, limping through the door and removing his goggles.

"Get to the lab, Alex. You know what to do there."

Eight seconds. Bridgette tugged William Stein's arm, vainly trying to pull the man across the lawn. Stein grunted, the muscles in his legs straining from the unaccustomed exertion.

Nine seconds. Bridgette's heart pounded. The lab was so close, yet seemed to keep moving beyond them. She could feel the guard's infra-red scopes probing the darkness for a target.

“Bridgette. Hurry.” Adam yelled.

Ten seconds. Adam tackled Bridgette and William as they arrived at the entrance. The doorway erupted in a staccato of impacting bullets.

Adam rolled to the door’s controls and closed the door, locking it. “Anyone hit?”

“I’m O.K., Dad.”

“I’m fine as well.” But Stein didn’t look well. His cheeks were flushed and he was breathing heavily.

“Want me to take your pack?” Adam offered.

“No, I can manage,” William insisted, struggling to his feet.

“I’ll meet you both in the lab.” Adam hustled through the outer work areas, passing three more unconscious guards and the remains of destroyed drones.

Entering the lab, he saw Carl, basked in the light of an opticom sparkling over the control panel he was operating. Alex Blue was ripping the cover from a climate control console in the rear of the lab. “Are you ready with the gas, Alex?”

“Just about,” Alex answered. “I’ve shut off the ducts to this room.” He extracted a metal canister from his backpack, set the timer for ten seconds and hurled it into the air duct. Hearing the canister explode, he quickly replaced the access panel. The gas would knock out the first wave of guards who entered the building. By the time the remaining guards could fetch gas masks, the time sphere would be gone.

Her work finished, Iris tensely waited beside the sphere. “Nice work, Iris,” Adam said as he passed on his way to a control panel near Carl. “What’s our status?”

“External systems powered to full. The by-passes we rigged yesterday are holding. Null-Grav generators are primed for ignition. We can engage the sphere’s gravity field.”

Bridgette and William, both wearing gas masks, entered the lab, closing the lead door behind them. “The gas is already filtering into the lab,” Bridgette reported.

“Fine, honey, you and William board the ship. Iris, Alex, you too.” Adam relieved Carl at the control panel, allowing his partner to board the sphere and engage the null-grav unit. A normal time shift would require a four-person lab team, but Carl had jerry-rigged a series of by-passes, patching all the necessary controls into one panel.

Adam’s eyes darted from gauge to gauge as the controls responded to Carl’s activities within the sphere. Appearing from thin air, a rabbit dashed across the panel, nearly tripping several circuit breakers. Carl had just begun lowering the ship’s density and interfacing with the continuum and already the anomaly portal had opened.

Adam monitored the power surges in the null-grave generators and

saw that the power was flowing uniformly. The data pathways linking the on-board opticomps to the ones in the lab continued their unimpeded exchange of information. Reasonably confident that all systems were functioning as well as he could hope, Adam turned towards the time sphere and was stunned by the scene in the lab.

A thirteen year old girl in leotards turned handsprings across the lab. A campfire crackled near the welding station. A pair of Buddhist monks conversed near the locker rooms. A circus performer drove a motorcycle across a wire stretched high over the lab floor. Adam slowly walked through the surreal landscape his lab had become, feeling as though he inhabited someone's hallucination.

"Don't move, Cooper!" The razor sharp reality of Ben Keyes' voice slashed through the irrationality of the lab. Adam spun to face his friend who was wearing a gas mask and aiming a pistol at Adam's chest. Using the electronic master pass attached to his belt buckle, Ben closed the monolithic lead door behind him. Noticing Adam wasn't wearing a gas mask, Ben removed his and cast a totally bewildered glance across the crazed diorama of the lab.

"This is crazy, Coop. Do you think I'd let you get away with this?"

"I was hoping to get around you. I should have known better." The ramp leading onto the sphere was a few feet behind Adam and to his right, but Ben could cut him down before he reached it. Not that Adam believed his friend would do that.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Iris crouched in the sphere's doorway, Uzi trained on Ben. "No Iris. Get back on the ship. I'll be alright.

"His piece is a Mitchell-Dopson .45. It doesn't fire tranqui-darts or stun bullets."

"He's a friend, Iris. I'm your employer and I'm ordering you back inside."

"You can't afford me, remember." Iris hesitated, but honored Adam's request and reentered the ship.

The smoke from the campfire began drifting over the two friends as they faced off. A coyote with blood stained jaws stood guard over the carrion of an elk, as a young boy dressed as Lady MacBeth delivered a soliloquy and strolled too near the feasting canine. Feeling his kill threatened, the coyote leapt at the Elizabethan, tearing a horrible gash in the actor's neck.

Adam knew the null-grav generators were nearly at full power and the mass variance within and without the null-grav field would soon be too great for him to enter the ship. He had to make his move soon.

"This has to be done, Ben," he shouted over the roar of the aerial performers motorcycle. "We've talked about this enough that you should understand what's at stake. You know I'm right."

“That’s not for me to call, Coop.” Ben’s authoritative voice lacked conviction. “The President’s grounded you. That’s all I’ve got to know. God knows I don’t want to shoot you but I will if I have to.” They continued to stare at one another, but couldn’t make eye contact because of the thickening smoke from the campfire.

A mongol barbarian, sword at the ready, staggered about the lab in confusion. A player piano appeared near the climate control panel and began playing Vaudeville tunes. A Zulu witch doctor howled strange incantations over the body of the slain Lady MacBeth.

Adam was out of time.

“I don’t think so, Ben.” He broke for the ramp behind him. Ben’s pistol fired twice, striking the ballerina as she pirouetted from nowhere into the bullet’s path. Adam whirled about in disbelief at a horrified Ben Keyes.

“Now or never, Cooper.” Iris’ strong hands grabbed Adam’s collar and pulled him into the sphere.

He flew across the interior of the time sphere, his mass reduced body propelled by the force required to move his normal body mass into the ship.

Lying on the floor he saw Carl’s figure at the control panel shimmer in blinding iridescence, before a bright flash blinded him from behind his eyes. There was a roar of static and then he fell deaf. He felt his body bursting from his pores. He couldn’t feel his hands or feet.

He was gone.

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